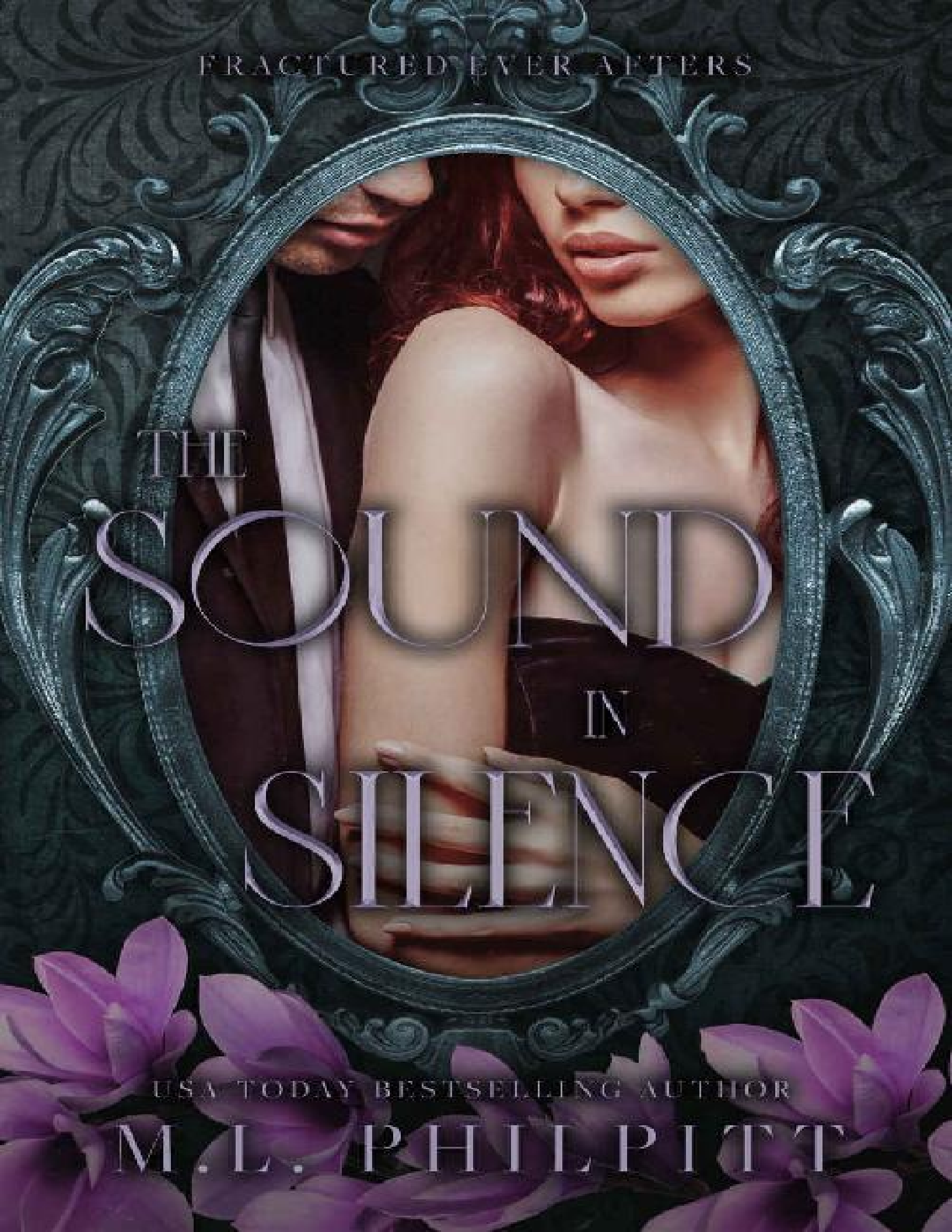
FRACTURED EVER AFTERS



THE SOUND IN SILENCE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

M.L. PHILPITT

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About the Author

The Sound in Silence (Fractured Ever Afters #5)
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Warning: This book contains mature content. Reader discretion is advised.

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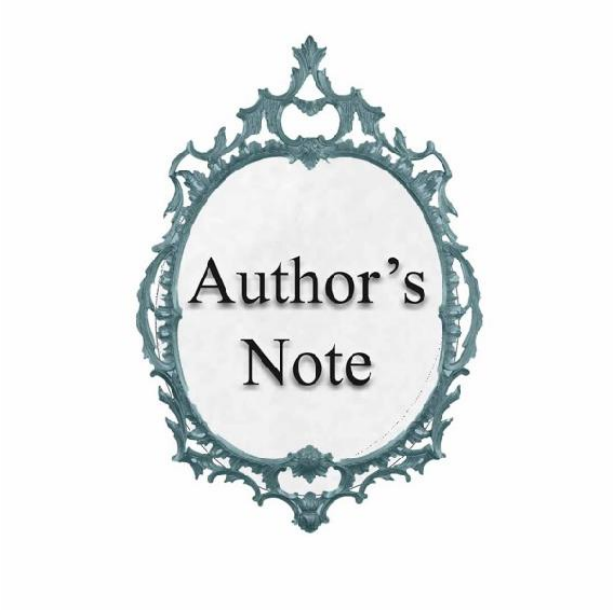


The Sound in Silence is book 5 of The Fractured Ever Afters series. This reads as a standalone but for complete background on the characters' lives, you can start with book 1, The Hunt in Elusion.

Timeline: This book begins when, in the Freedom of Captivity, Flynn and Nico argue in front of Erico. Therefore, this is right before Nico was made Boss. Please note, Erico referring to him as an underboss in the beginning is not an error.

There are triggers in this book that do not occur in any of my other published books. Without spoiling, it is not rape, physical abuse to the characters, child or pet abuse and/or death. This is the best I can bring your attention to it without spoilers so if there is content you feel triggering to you that is not those categories or the typical content in my books, then please direct your attention to this link. Feel free to contact me with any questions. If you feel I have missed a trigger warning, please let me know.

Note, I'm Canadian. I write using Canadian/UK spelling, even though most of this book takes place in the US, with one US main character. This means words will have U's in them, or double LL's. (colour, flavour, signalling, etc.) These are not typos.

That’s all. Happy reading!

“Dangerous” by Royal Deluxe
“Legends Are Made” by Sam Tinnesz
“I’m Not Okay” by Citizen Soldier
“Thank You For Hating Me” by Citizen Soldier
“In My Blood” by Shawn Mendes
“Lonely” by Noah Cyrus
“Would Anyone Care” by Citizen Soldier
“Hell and Back” by Self Deception
“Another Life” by Motionless In White
“Fix Me” by 10 Years
“Warrior” by Beth Crowley
“Meet Me on the Battlefield” by SVRCINA
“Head Above Water” by April Lavigne
“Hallelujah (I’m Not Dead)” by Citizen Soldier
“Never Say Never” by The Fray
“Glowing in the Dark” by The Girl and The Dreamcatcher
“Speechless” by Naomi Scott

Listen here

For those who struggle to see the light in the dark.
Who find getting out of bed impossible some days.
Who prefer to remain invisible in a world full of chaos.

You are seen.
You are valid.
You are allowed to not be okay all the time.

Sometimes the greatest strength is allowing another to see your struggles.

— Erico Rossi

Erico

Some people come into our lives and change it, even before we realize what they're doing.

That's what Aurora Corsetti is doing to mine. Altering the course of my life in ways I couldn't even begin to predict before today.

Entering Nico Corsetti's office, I'm met with a tense silence as he leads me inside. An air of agitation rolls off him, making the room more stifling, but it's a familiar sensation. Comforting, even, which makes me more curious about the pending conversation, even before we've begun. The few times I've met Nico in the past, he's concealed his emotions, so this tension is unlike him.

When Nico, underboss of Montreal's mob, invited my parents and me to his engagement party, it was a prime opportunity for me to meet his sister, Aurora, who'll be my future fiancée. An arrangement I would only be completing for the benefit of the *Famiglia*. Us meeting for the first time with the distraction of an engagement party seemed less contrived.

Aurora is every bit as classically beautiful as photos showed her to be. She arrived at the party with her head high, which was admirable considering the obvious anxiety radiating from her. When she requested we avoid a swarm of guests, it was nearly laughable because if she couldn't handle her brother's party, she would fail at being my wife.

Her need for ‘air’ or whatever fucking excuse she gave before running off was met by deaf ears. If it was a game, I had no desire to play. As I later explained, when she was in the hospital after being drugged, our union was a wise move for both families. Other than a few pointless vows, the exchange of rings, and a marriage certificate, I couldn’t care less.

My role as underboss keeps me busy, and I’m weeks away from moving into Father’s role of Boss. After I wed, he’ll be stepping down and handing over complete control of the *Famiglia*, which makes the requirement for an heir more pressing. Getting married is simply the first step in ensuring the organization’s leadership continues under our bloodline.

“You can take a seat.” Nico gestures to the chairs in front of his ornate, oak desk. It reminds me of mine, with the carvings on the side. At least my future brother-in-law has good taste.

Months ago, he proposed a union between me and his sister to mend past feuds, started long before either of us were born, when his father and their organization’s current head, Lorenzo, slaughtered my uncle. On the day of my uncle’s wedding to Caterina Bellini—now Caterina Corsetti being Lorenzo’s wife—control of the organization shifted to his brother, my father, and soon, me.

Nico claimed it’s time to look forward and not at the past, and I agreed to the idea of combining our families. Having no immediate female relatives to wed him or his brother, since our initial conversation happened before he married his wife, Della, it came down to myself and his sister.

So at the party when Aurora took off, I excused myself under the guise of searching for her, which appeased my parents. But instead of turning the way she had, I went left down the hallway and strolled through the Corsetti mansion, thinking about how different it looks from my own, especially after recent renovations.

With the engagement to Aurora planned, my parents moved out of our mansion in the Hamptons, so she and I could make that our home. It’d be more Aurora’s than mine though, since she’d be living there, while I stayed in my Manhattan condo, as I typically do since it’s close to work, and would only visit on weekends. Nonetheless, the mansion I’ve called home my entire life is too stifling and old-fashioned for the updated Hamptons beach-style homes now there, so I had it redone. Walls replaced with massive windows, letting in natural daylight and the oceanfront view. New

fixtures, fresh white paint, and the bathrooms and kitchens refitted with finer building materials.

“Drink?” Nico offers, gesturing to his sidebar. He certainly needs one, I think, to ease his tenseness.

“Please.” I force a smile, granting him a look of ease. Within minutes, I have a glass of liquor in my hand, and I sip it, appreciative of the bourbon’s smooth, rich texture.

Nico finally takes his chair, the leather cracking loudly in the silent room. Everything seems louder in silence…especially people.

One woman in particular.

As if the universe wanted me to think about *her*, a large man bursts through Nico’s office at that precise second, agitation radiating off him in waves as he explodes at his boss. Nico looks appalled, but I excuse them to talk, amused by the show, even while my head blocks out their conversation, using the few moments to think about a silent woman that has been plaguing my mind for weeks.

Never would I have believed Aurora’s need for escape would have led me to *her*. When I walked the seemingly empty hallways, I found one that wasn’t.

She stood at the very end, gazing at an abstract painting of mute browns, tans, and white. Its boringness instantly made me want to gouge out my eyes, but thankfully, the woman gained my attention instead.

There was a lot I noticed about her, but the most striking feature was her deep, burnt hair. So bright against the dreary walls, and even more unique against the swarm of blondes and brunettes in attendance. It hung in soft waves, over the back of a jade green dress, which made everything about her seem even more vibrant. The dress was the second thing to capture my attention. A slim gown, curving around hips that demanded to be held, and greeting the floor with her barely-there sways. It was simple and not elaborate, unlike Aurora’s gown, which was obviously chosen to make a statement.

It was there that Aurora’s absence changed how I’ll forever look at the colour green.

It was also there that I realized, twice already, I was comparing this stranger to my future fiancée, all without even seeing her face.

She heard me approach, based on the stiffening of her back. Shockingly, she turned to face me too, and I recall my steps faltering, my heart literally

skipping a beat with my stolen breath. Captured by a soft, round face, speckled with the lightest of freckles, a slightly upturned nose and full lips. But her eyes. Those are what I still see in my dreams, weeks later. It was those fucking eyes I got lost in, and was unable to stop gazing at, even later that night, when I learned who exactly she is to the Corsettis. Sapphire blue eyes that widened slightly with my approach, and when I spoke, I expected some acknowledgement within them. Some flicker of unease or curiosity.

But instead, she gave me nothing but silence.

Still, I stood in the silence that dulled the throbbing in my head caused by the party. When I commented on the painting, she gave no response.

It was a strange encounter, lasting about ten minutes, before she returned to the party. Trying to process our interaction, I remained behind for a few extra minutes, and when I also went back, she was nowhere in the crowd. Later at dinner, she was seated by the head of the table, beside Della, and met my gaze for the briefest of seconds before shyly looking away. She never glanced my way again. I knew this for a fact because I couldn't stop looking, even when my mother explained she's Della's sister.

"Sorry about that." Nico's voice pulls me from my memories, right as the distant sound of office doors slamming shut make their way to us. "He's normally not like that."

"It's fine." Whatever to move this conversation along so he can finally explain why I'm here.

Nico requested support with a potential war he was facing, which I almost denied since we're not technically allies yet. It seemed like more of a bother for my soldiers. But with the engagement to Aurora only weeks away, being here might move the engagement along quicker and get it over with sooner, so I chose to come.

"Seems you have your hands full here."

Nico chuckles, but it's not a sound of ease. He's on edge—nervous, which tells me I should be too. For a second, I empathize. It's not a simple task, having to step into the footsteps left by one's father, and we both share that burden.

"You have no idea," he replies, sipping from his own glass. "It's related to what I want to speak with you about actually."

"Oh?" I sit straighter. My movement draws attention to the comforting weight of my Glock strapped to my side. A weapon the Corsettis haven't

apprehended out of mutual respect and trust. After all, within three weeks, I'll be this man's brother-in-law.

"First, thank you for making the trip from New York so quickly to aid us. Your support would have been tremendous, but we didn't foresee circumstances turning out how they had. Regardless, your willingness to help is appreciated."

"Of course. That's what family is for, right?" I answer carefully, my grip tightening around my glass.

"Exactly." He pauses, his stare hardening. "Which is what makes this next part so difficult—"

I rest my drink on the edge of his desk, preparing for the news. No one enjoys hearing 'difficult' news, but in this line of work, Nico could possibly be announcing deceit. This feels too close to what Father warned me about. He doesn't approve of this agreement and claims the Corsettis shouldn't be trusted.

"Aurora's return into the family has been…different than what we believed it'd be. She's complicated and didn't take to being Lorenzo Corsetti's daughter well."

What is he saying?

"She's chosen her own path and it's one I can't compete with. Believe me, I've tried."

"Speak plainly, Corsetti," I demand, all the guise of niceties disappearing with impatience. "What are you not saying?"

"That my sister refuses to wed you."

Recalling the woman I met with in the hospital wasn't the same girl I was introduced to at his engagement party, so this isn't all that surprising. There was a new desperation in her, which she didn't bother hiding. Hell, even when we met for the second time at his wedding, she didn't mask her hatred for the circumstances. Something changed in her during the week between his engagement party and his wedding.

"When has that ever stopped a union?" It's a well-known fact that women in mobs don't always get their way, but backroom deals have already been made; therefore, it'd entice a war to break them.

"Because I'm backing her decision," he replies with a firm finality that proves Father's presumptions were correct.

"Think hard about your decision, Corsetti." My warning is blatant. *Decide wisely or we'll have to react appropriately.* "This is twice your

family will have fucked us over."

"We're not breaking off the engagement," he continues, his tone leaving little room for argument, if I wasn't already verbally toe-to-toe with the man. "I'm proposing an amendment."

"Intriguing," I reply honestly, my temper de-escalating into unease. Given Aurora is the only Corsetti female, an amendment would be…My mind searches for another family member of equal value but comes up empty. Unless there's long-lost daughters Lorenzo and Caterina have been hiding, whoever Nico offers will be an insult after Aurora.

While Nico blows out a long breath and manages another sip of his drink, I study his body language for leftover nerves—shaking hands, a tight grip—but find none.

"My sister-in-law, Ariella Lambert. You wouldn't know her."

I do know her.

After the engagement party, it was her, not Aurora, who starred in my dreams. I know her—know *of* her—but before now, I didn't have a name to put with her alluring face. *Ariella.* A unique name for the silent, mysterious woman who made me, for the first time ever, feel like I was drowning. Lost for words, unable to breathe, trying to solve the puzzle that is her.

But remembering why she's being mentioned, I end up with numerous questions. "Your sister-in-law, Corsetti? That's pretty cold, even for me. She never asked to become a part of your family when you married Della."

"She volunteered."

Volunteered? The beautiful woman who hadn't spoken a word *volunteered* to be married off. Suddenly, I long to learn more because who would agree to such an engagement? It's one thing for a woman born into this lifestyle to smile and march down the aisle because it's their duty, but it's another for an outsider to willingly do it.

What are they playing at?

"I understand she's not as valuable as my—"

"She's fine," I interrupt, his brows lifting in response to my quick agreement. A protectiveness regarding his pending insult has me biting my own tongue, tapering down the sudden, strange emotion. "Surprised her sister would allow this."

He huffs a snort, his gaze drifting to the door, presumably imaging his wife somewhere beyond it. "They had a few choice words. Della's pissed,

yeah, but if Ariella's offering, I accepted in order not to wreck what we've been building between the organizations."

Meaning he didn't want a war he couldn't win.

"Of all the women I thought I'd be offering to you, she was at the bottom of my list. If you don't accept, then—"

I cut him off again. "She's fine. I accept."

He jerks. "Just like that?"

No.

Yes.

Father will be pissed I'm not arguing, but the mystery surrounding Ariella distracted my mind for days after the engagement party. After I finally managed to get her out of my head, Nico's wedding brought all those thoughts back when I watched her walk down the aisle. When I should have been observing the ceremony, I was instead preoccupied by studying her standing up there as Della's maid-of-honour.

Everyone else at that wedding seemed happy for the couple, but Ariella didn't. Her mouth was in a near permanent flat line, but there was no sign of dislike or hostility toward the groom. During their vows, she managed a small smile, and at the reception, she was again smiling with Della. I don't believe it was the couple, but something certainly lowered her mood, and not knowing what—so I could fix it—drove me mad. My parents pushing me toward Aurora to dance saved me from going to Ariella.

"Not just like that," I reply. "I have questions, but to answer yours: a future boss's sister-in-law is still a good match." Others might not think so—Father especially—but she still aligns us with the Corsettis. "If she's volunteered, it'd be insulting to deny her. Agreeing to marry a stranger, move away from her home and to a new country, to be a *Famiglia* wife, is…" I trail off, suddenly reluctant to share my thoughts. *Resilient. Commendable. Enthralling.*

"Yeah," he agrees with a slight smirk. With every passing second, his stress seems to be decreasing. "There's things you should know about her, though. Facts that might change your mind."

Doubtful. Once again, I'm struck with appreciation for Nico because if he believes what he's about to tell me would change my mind, it's admirable not to be hiding it.

"Ariella and Della have had a difficult past, but Ariella more than her sister."

I move to the edge of my chair, dreading his next words, but also anxious.

“Two years ago, Ariella and their mother were in a car accident. Their mother was killed.”

Fuck.

“Losing her mother, or the accident itself—something in that event changed Ariella. Now, she only verbally speaks to her sister. She was diagnosed with trauma-induced selective mutism.”

That explains why she wouldn’t talk to me at the engagement party. It wasn’t her being shy, rude, or averse. She *couldn’t.*

She lost her mother and her voice in one go. A burning spreads through my body, but I can’t identify it. Even glancing at the door behind me, imagining her somewhere beyond it, has me shifting in the chair, needing this conversation to end soon so I can find her.

“So you can see why this adds a challenge?”

It doesn’t.

Perhaps it should but I don’t care. We’ll get through it.

Father will kill me. With me taking his position soon, she’ll be a Boss’s wife. How will she perform the social duties expected if she’s unable to talk?

But she’s the very woman who’s intrigued me for weeks now. Plagued my mind, my senses, my everything. To deny her offer, to turn away from his proposal, makes me sick to consider.

“She’s spent the past few years in a medical centre, which is where their stepfather shoved her after the accident. Recently, she’s moved in here so she’s still adjusting. My family’s doctor has her file, but she’s refusing any form of further treatment.” He holds up his hands, palms out, like he’s defending his own actions. “Ultimately, it’s her choice what she does so I haven’t pushed. Nor do I know the details of the conversations she and the doctor have had.”

“It’s fine. I’ll get her set up with the *Famiglia* doctor.”

“You’re okay with this?” he checks, gripping his cup a bit tighter than before. Like the final offer to still turn away is making him apprehensive again.

“The agreement stands, Corsetti.”

He tips his head a fraction in acknowledgement, takes a swig of his drink, and when it lowers back down, two fingers lift to gesture toward me.

“You have questions. Go ahead and ask them.”

“Not for you. For her. I want to see her.”

Ariella

Being a shadow is great.

It’s what I’ve always been, and what I continue to be. What I appreciate, even. No one looks twice at a shadow when it’s blending into the background. Opposite of all the attention Della once received. She’s the eldest, smart and beautiful. When we were younger, guys were quickly sucked into her vortex. Back then, I wasn’t salty about it because there were times where the thought of having to share so much of myself with another person made me ill.

Which is why there’s a benefit to being shoved into the backdrop and ignored.

It's easier to exist in the dark than shine in the light.

The amusing part, in high school, Della despised the attention, and was fine being single and focused on her school work and friendships. Yet, between the two of us, she was the first to be wed. I mean, considering the past few years, it makes complete sense, which is why I’m pleased for my sister.

But it’s ironic. Because while she didn’t want the attention from guys, I did. To a point. I dreamed of going off to university, meeting my happily-ever-after, starting a life together, and having kids eventually. I fantasized about discovering myself.

In some ways, I suppose, the dream of emerging from the ocean of a lifetime of disappointment to discovering the surface and what life on land has to offer is still tempting.

Moving into the Corsetti mansion after Della got married to the mafia family's second-in-command made my life better and worse. Being away from the medical centre and home with Della is great, but it also brought me into the Corsetti family's fold and all their drama.

With the return of Nico's sister, Aurora, much of the attention has been on her, allowing me to hide again. Able to stick to the background unless Della drags me out or Nico's mother, Caterina, insists on 'getting to know me better.' By now, she must realize I'm not interesting, not like Della. I don't leap in front of bullets to save her son. I simply *exist.*

When they do leave me be, I wallow in bed when the darkness becomes too overpowering, or when exiting the bedroom assigned to me gets too overwhelming to consider.

The very bedroom I'm currently sitting in, staring at the space that's never quite felt like mine. Depending how Nico's current conversation goes, this might not be my room for much longer.

Sending Nico the message I had surprised everyone, including myself. Aurora created a problem by falling in love with her bodyguard, and I solved it by volunteering for an arranged marriage, to the man Aurora was supposed to marry.

Why? Who knows. A method to feel something perhaps. To get away from Della, because as pleasant as it is to be with her again, she's suffocating. While I'm content to remain in my bedroom, lights off, and concentrate on breathing and remaining semi-sane, she's trying to drag me into her light.

It's not wanted, or required.

Maybe it's a way to find the happily-ever-after I always dreamed of, and watched, in a single accident, get robbed from me? Locked beneath Nico and Della's protection, I'll never meet anyone. And really, who'd want to get to know the traumatized, mute woman? This way, getting into an arranged marriage means shackling myself to a man.

Fuck, I'm pathetic.

According to Nico, Erico Rossi, the underboss to the New York *Famiglia*, is as ruthless as they come. Earlier today, Nico brought me into his office for a serious conversation and explained what my offer truly

means. Moving to New York, becoming a wife, and requiring to survive in a world I wasn't born into, but rather, forced into. First by Mom's marriage to Stefano De Falco and then by Della, when she willingly stuck around. I suppose, by me too when I agreed to live here. But was there truly a choice?

Perhaps volunteering to wed Erico Rossi my way of thanking the Corsettis for saving my sister and me from a worser fate? One Mom found herself paying. Everyone here has been kind since we moved in, and they've been understanding of my limitations. I'd miss them by leaving.

But I'm drowning.

Della believes my life will worsen amongst the *Famiglia*. Maybe, but maybe not. Perhaps they're the land I've been seeking.

Erico and I initially met by accident. Hiding during Della's engagement party, from the noise and bustle of the guests, he found me studying a painting. I'd snuck away because watching my sister celebrate becoming a wife got too overwhelming. She looked flawless striding through the ballroom on Nico's arm. Her head was held high, she donned a dress that was made for her, and while terrified of messing up in front of others, she made it through.

I was proud of her, but it also reminded me of everything I don't and will never have.

The first time I met Nico, when he visited me in the medical centre for information about our stepfather, I recognized the good in him, despite the criminal life he controls. Even then, his care for my sister shone, but at their engagement party, it was stifling. No man would look at me like he does her, not with my current difficulties. Her sunlight was bursting from her, making the shadows of my darkness even blacker. Consuming me until I slipped out undetected.

When I heard his soft steps approaching me in the hallway I hid in; I knew it was a guy because the oncoming sound didn't have the same pierce of a woman's heel. I assumed Nico, searching for me at my sister's request, but instead, it was the very man I saw being introduced to Aurora.

Erico Rossi from the New York mob family who was slated to be her fiancé.

He was every bit classically handsome up close as he was afar. Night-black hair that was styled neatly, but it only made me curious what it looked like free and unruly. Eyes so dark that stared at me with a burning question in his gaze.

Who are you?

I'd heard it as though he spoke aloud. He stopped beside me and introduced himself. Asked my name, how I was enjoying the party, and if I was okay.

If I was *okay.*

No stranger has ever asked me such a thing, not unless they came donning a lab coat and stethoscope too. For the first time ever, I was silent, stunned, in a manner having nothing to do with my mutism.

When I didn't respond to any of his questions, he never gave up asking more. I didn't even try to talk because there would be no payoff. Within minutes, Erico would return to Aurora's side and I'd return to being the strange woman in the background.

After a while, he accepted my silence, and for the first time since arriving into the Corsetti's mansion, I *breathed*. Like my mind was an absolute blank slate. Stressors from the past, worries of the present, fears of the future—they all melted away in exchange for absolutely nothing.

Was it that single meeting that had me volunteering to wed him? If so, I'm even more pathetic because that tiny interaction meant so little to him, considering he didn't look at me twice for the rest of the night. His attention, rightly so, returned to his would-be fiancée. The second time I saw him was at Della's wedding. He was a guest and I was the maid-of-honour; that's all. Two people co-existing in one room and nothing more.

The door opens, pulling me from all my musings as Nico fills the doorway. His flat mouth and grim expression make my stomach drop in disappointment. Of course, Erico denied the offer. He nearly had the Corsetti princess, so why would he want the mute sister-in-law? It was a fantasy waiting to happen. A fairy tale I stupidly swept myself into, the same way every storybook princess seems to get themselves closer to the prince, only to have him yanked away.

"He agreed to the union but wishes to speak with you first."

He agreed?

I slide from the bed, my legs wobbling with every step toward the doorway. The large decorative mirror resting against the far wall makes me flinch at my own experience. Both times Erico has seen me, I've been done up for the celebrations, making my current appearance more striking—and not in a pleasant way. Hair that I'm pretty sure I haven't washed in over

three days is drawn in a messy, crooked ponytail, and I'm wearing yoga pants and a tank I only remembered to change out this morning.

Well, he should know what he's getting, I suppose.

At the doorway, I pause, staring up at Nico. Other than Della, he's the only one here who's heard my voice, but it was only a single time. With every repeated attempt, the usual tightness chokes me.

Dr. Shappo, the Corsettis' doctor, theorized my trauma is linked to trust, explaining why Della continues to be my safe person. But when Nico showed up at the medical centre that day, searching for ways to save her, my mind granted me use of my voice. Let me trust Nico enough *for* Della.

I force a smile to rid Nico of his pinched expression as he murmurs, "Ariella, I can still end this. The situation isn't your burden to bear, and while you're doing a huge service, I feel guilty."

Making my silent statement known, I step by him and into the hallway, heading for the staircase that'll take me to the main floor and his office. He falls into step beside me, his hands shoved in his front pockets, his shoulders slouched lower than I've ever seen.

"I'm serious. I'll alter the terms and can send him away, but once you meet with him, I'm not sure anything I say will change his mind."

For once, it feels nice to have another person broadcasting their own worries, especially someone so naturally guarded. Halfway down the stairs, I lay my hand on his arm, reassuring him of my decision once again.

He doesn't smile, or really acknowledge me at all. Instead, he's silent as he leads me toward his office. At the doorway, he points to the wall beside it. "I'll be right here if you need me."

I wave him off and open his door, stepping right inside before any sort of emotion other than minor confidence has a chance to creep up. Especially since there's a few others threatening to tear me down: trepidation, self-hatred, doubt, sadness. Name it, I'm feeling it.

I shut the door with my back, my hands weaving together behind me as I stare at the figure across the room. The man perched on the edge of Nico's desk isn't the same friendly face from the party. This time, I think I'm truly seeing New York's underboss. Flat expression, drawn features as he leans against the rich, wooden desk, his legs crossed at the ankle and his arms loose by his side, with his hands perched on the desktop for balance. He's an image of ease, with chilling features that imply everything but relaxation.

His voice only amplifies the emotion. “Come here, Ariella.”

The command forces my feet forward. Bowing to men has always left a sour taste in my mouth. Perhaps it explains why Mom’s marriage to Stefano made me sick from the moment she announced the engagement. Witnessing his alpha-dog treatment of her was horrible.

But instinct says this isn’t the time to be defiant. Not unless I’m turning around and taking up Nico’s offer to escape this.

Erico’s sharp gaze stalks me, his eyes raking up and down my form. Starting from the mess atop my head, over my bare shoulders, my stomach, and toward my legs. No doubt, questioning his sanity for agreeing to this match. It’s okay because I’m doing the same, wondering how I’ll *live* with this man.

The same way you do here. In your room, alone, with your head buried in the blankets.

Ah, the voice. My dark voice that visits me constantly. There’s comfort in being reminded it’s there. Without it, I’d definitely be lost in this interaction.

My spine tingles with an awareness I despise, and my hands curl by side. I feel suffocated. Like I shouldn’t be enjoying it, but even with his flat expression, he’s making me intrigued. Interested in seeing how the version of him I first met translates into the present.

In the same breath, I shove the feeling away. Of course, my stupid mind is interested in him, the same way it was from our very first meeting. But this is a wedding of convenience for us both. I’m a stand-in for the Corsetti princess. He’d never be interested in me beyond completing his duty.

When there’s about three feet of space left between us, I stop, straightening my back, my chin lifting half an inch to hide my apprehension. The corner of his mouth twitches at whatever’s in his head as he continues appraising me. Understandable, considering this marriage is essentially him buying me.

You had to get a man to purchase *you for someone to be interested.*

Sometimes, I hate my brain for being correct, even in its depreciating, grim thoughts.

His head tilts and his hands lift from the desk’s surface to instead cross his arms over his chest. His expression remains impassive, which I assume is a positive thing. I think. Do I hope so?

“Hello again, Ariella.”

Oh, goodness, is his voice somehow deeper than it was the first time we met?

I bob my head in greeting, hoping Nico explained my limitations, or he's about to get quite the surprise.

"Seems we're about to get to know one another very well."

My mouth presses into a small smile, in response.

"Right." He doesn't seem surprised by my lack of response. If anything, I think I catch disappointment flick through his gaze before he suddenly asks, "Are you a virgin?"

For a second, the abrupt question throws me, but then I recall where I am. Who I'm with. With a straight spine, I shake my head. Lost that to an old high school boyfriend when I was eighteen.

The reminder of such a time is a pang to my heart. Not toward Evan, the guy I dated. Not even sure what happened to him after high school. But more, for the simpler time. A time when I laughed with my friends, composed music regularly, and looked forward to all life had to offer. A time where I dreamed of getting a music degree and becoming a teacher. Of meeting a nice man, and eventually having my own family.

Funny how a single person can alter the course of one's life so badly. If Mom had never met Stefano…

Erico grunts, bringing my focus back to him and the conversation. "Well, I guess that's to be expected."

Is it?

"Are you on birth control?"

I nod. Mom brought me to the doctor right around the time Evan and I began dating. Said she would rather me be safe than sorry. I never stopped taking the pills because I've gotten used to the other benefits.

"Get off it."

I open my mouth, an argument pending, if only I can get my voice to work, but then I remember what my offer of marriage truly means. *I* basically decided this, and Nico re-explained as much.

Heirs.

A notion both exciting and terrifying. Wanting kids is one thing, when I also desired the life that went along with it. Meeting someone, getting married, and then, as our lives permit, starting the family with the man who *chose* me. Getting children in this kind of relationship means our children won't witness their parents in love.

But this might be the only way you ever have children.

Might? Try: this is the only *way.*

Besides, producing heirs on command is better than nothing, right?

"Ariella?"

Right. He's waiting for a response, while my inner voices are battling back and forth over a decision I can't even make for myself.

I nod.

"You understand why, don't you?" His voice softens, reminding me of the man I met in the hallway.

Another nod.

He stares for a long ten seconds, in which I count each one, never feeling more scrutinized than this second. An experiment he finally decides to examine closer when he pushes off Nico's desk and takes the three strides toward me, standing closer than he was even the night of the party.

Warmth from his body emits and for once, I'm not completely against another person standing so close. He smells good, like something I can't quite place. It's musky and sweet, an odd combination that suits him.

His hand comes into my vision and every instinct demands I shy away. But after today, he'll be allowed to touch me in any way he deems because of the choice *I* made. It's that reminder keeping me still.

He tips my chin up with a single finger, his strength overpowering my will. I'm forced to look into his dark eyes rather than his chest as his thumb strokes gently over my skin. I melt. His calloused thumb feels *right*, even though I convince myself it's only because no one's touched me intimately in many years.

This is fake. You're a stand-in for the real thing.

"Nico claims you volunteered for this arrangement. Is that true?"

Even in his grip, my nod feels weak.

"There was no coercion on his part then?"

No, I mouth, with a slight head shake.

"So what made you of all people volunteer to marry me?"

Erico

There's no room for oversight in my position. Everything is black and white. Roles understood. Performances expected.

Witnessing my parents' relationship gave me the outline of what mine will be. Two people who co-exist, eventually have a child to continue the bloodline, and that's all. There's normality in this kind of connection. The lack of deep feelings mean the *Famiglia* will always come first. A future I expected to put into motion with Aurora, who, after meeting her at the engagement party, I knew would be the ideal woman for my needs. Having no interest in her, we could very easily recreate what my parents have. Emotionless, each of us playing our part. We'd live separately, save for the occasional visit home.

The unexpected variable was *her*.

The redhead that makes my head want to explode and my hands to explore. The silent woman—traumatized, according to Nico—with zero stake in mob politics. Yet, here we are, discussing our union, leaving me tongue-tied and without words as I planned on outlining her future. My thumb strokes her cheek, fascinated as her skin grows a deeper shade with her blush.

She shrugs to respond to my question about why she volunteered herself. A part of me feels cautious, as to why *her*. What game is going on

that I’m unaware of? While the other part of me is simply curious as to why she did this. What’s in her mind that led to this?

“You have so little stake in your sister’s new family, so I was surprised when Nico said you were making this sacrifice.” Another shrug in response and I finally drop my hands back to my sides, releasing the skin I could very well grow addicted to touching. “All right then. My position keeps me busy, which I assume you’re aware of. This means, you’ll be on your own frequently. I’ll be living in the city, at my Manhattan condo, and you’ll be staying at the Rossi mansion in the Hamptons. A bodyguard will be assigned to you for protection. Understand?”

She nods, her expression blank and devoid of what’s in her head. Surely as I recite facts, regret must be creeping up? This can’t be the life she desires.

“Eventually, I will need an heir and we will work through that. I’m sure you understand, Ariella, you and I will not be like your sister and Nico.”

Romance is too much work. A relationship is simply unfathomable to consider when working in New York’s crime district. Relationships demand equality and sharing stories with one’s partner, but any woman who’s privy to what I do, knows better to ask, and anyone who isn’t, shouldn’t be knowing.

Again, she bobs her head, her expression remaining unbothered. While her agreement is positive for my needs, it pains me to see her falling so easily, so quickly into it. No fight, no spark…it almost doesn’t match the gentle flame buried in her azure eyes.

“One more thing: your medical needs. We’ll get your file transferred to the *Famiglia* doctor and any support, any therapy, can be decided between you and him.”

For once, she actually does something. She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a phone, her fingers rapidly flying over the screen before she turns it toward me to read what she typed out.

> NO MORE COUNSELLING. I’M OVER PEOPLE TRYING TO FIX ME. PLEASE.

I smile. Maybe it’s her tenacity; the clear determination in her plea. Even if I don’t know what she sounds like, I can almost predict the way she’d verbally say that. Throaty and smooth, with a final plea tacked on almost like she didn’t want to add it at all.

“Sure thing, Ariella.”

Before she has the chance to put away her phone, I yank it from her hands, holding it away so she knows not to bother fighting me for it. I scroll through her apps until finding her contacts and add a new entry with my name and number before giving it back.

“If you need to contact me between now and the wedding, you now have my number to do so. Anytime. Call or text.” It’s doubtful she will.

The corners of her mouth pull up into a slight grin that seems entirely forced, and I vow right then and there, one day, I’ll work for a genuine smile. Not sure why I want it, but I do.

“Do you have any questions?”

An expectant head shake that makes her red hair fly. A stream of sunlight from the window behind us catches on the colour, highlighting her face, making her look younger.

“How old are you?” I demand, suddenly aware of the unknown fact.

Her left hand raises with two fingers held up and her right with one. Twenty-one.

Christ. “Ten years younger than me.” A few years past high school, a sister wrapped up in mob life, a mother deceased from a car accident, and soon to be shackled to a man a decade older than her when she’s hardly experienced life. This isn’t different than marrying Aurora, who’s the same age as Ariella, but it feels like *more*. Like a tightness in my chest from the guilt is telling me it’s different. Aurora was bred into this life. With Ariella, I sympathize.

“Well,” I break my stare with her and manage to walk around her, heading for the door, “I’ll speak with Nico about finalizing a few details, including a date, and then…” I stop, tongue dabbing at my dry lips. I don’t recall the last time someone’s made me feel as uncertain as I do now. Not nervous, but still a sense like I’m about to trip. “Then I suppose I’ll see you at the wedding.”

I take a step but not toward the door, in the direction I was initially headed. Instead, it’s back toward her. I’m close enough to catch the flicker of emotion—of heartbreak—before it’s gone. So quick I believe I imagined it as I finally turn away.

My father pinches the bridge of his nose, seething from where he's seated inside one of our clubs. Since Father is days away from retirement, he's been wrapping things up slowly and going from business to business—both legal and the underground ones—and finalizing anything he has his hand in.

"Do you realize the severity in what you have done, Erico? The Corsettis refuse to give you Aurora, so you agree to wed a *no name*."

That's precisely what I did, but a surge of protectiveness brings my fist down onto the desk's surface, jolting him enough until he drops his hand from his face. "Don't speak about her like that."

Father's eyes narrow, the warning of a man who's slaughtered hundreds. In that moment, I'm pleased to have no brother because if he had another option, I get the sense, it'd be him and not me taking over. "We had the ideal candidate and you choose a *mute* instead. We have no idea her upbringing, her family, if she's even pure or not. How do we know she isn't hiding a child somewhere?"

Every question Father throws my way has my teeth grinding, but I don't argue his points because they're valid considerations, even if they're none I'm entertaining. Not when *she*—the fucking siren—the *sirena*—who's been invading my mind since the first glance will be mine. At least with my ring on her finger and her tucked in my home, I'll get so much of her, my mind will finally be freed.

But Father's days away from stepping down, as per our agreement that with my marriage, I'd also be taking over as *Famiglia* Boss. So, keeping a calm voice, I explain, "She's Nico Corsetti's sister-in-law. We wanted to align with them, and Ariella will still accomplish that."

Father wipes at his forehead before dropping his weight onto the chair's backing. "Months ago, when you announced the deal you and Corsetti struck, I had my doubts. When Caterina Corsetti was supposed to marry your uncle, the Corsettis stole her from us. I never wanted to fix the instability between the two organizations, but you insisted, and I respected your choice. With you running things soon, can't fault you for wanting a clean slate with our northern competitors. But *this*," he pauses, the weight of his word filling the room, "this was a stupid decision."

Pressing my hands into his desk, I lean forward. "If you still trust me to be Boss, then you'll trust this decision. This is a win because whether it be Aurora or Ariella who stands with me at the end of the aisle, we're still

aligned with Nico. As for everything else you mentioned, she has no secret children."

Father's lips press together as he takes a long moment to consider my words before finally grunting. "I fucking knew the Corsettis would pull something. That's why I insisted to Lorenzo we move your wedding up, and yet, only weeks away, and they've *still* managed to fuck it up. No matter because while you were in Canada, I was working on a secondary option for you, and with this news you've brought back, it's a good thing I did."

I straighten as he reaches into his desk drawer and pulls out an image, tossing it toward me. It's of a woman, sexy and with a grin that says she's aware of her own looks. Confident, staring right into the camera, her dark eyes promising danger. Long black hair tumbles around her shoulders and melds with the off-shoulder black gown.

"She is?" I flick the photo back toward my father, uninterested in why he has a picture of a stranger.

"A potential wife."

"In a week, I'll have a wife." That was the deal made with Nico. A quick engagement; enough time for Ariella to say goodbye to her sister and for me to get things prepared here. The counter-agreement was that the ceremony would happen in his home, and not here. "Don't need her."

He takes the picture back, studying the woman as though she's an item for sale. "I entertained your agreement with Nico, but given today's events, this woman could be a more suitable candidate. Her name is Vanessa Volkov."

"Volkov," I repeat, my blood instantly icing over. "Of *the* Volkovs? The Russian Bratva. Father, what did you do?"

"Nothing yet," he replies, and instantly, my blood pressure drops a few degrees. "But we can very easily. The Corsettis ruined a connection they want—need—more than us. And don't claim otherwise, because at first sign of trouble, they requested *your* help. Well, we could better benefit having the Bratva on our side. They have weapons I've been dying to get my hands on, son." My father leans forward, his dark eyes brighter and more excited than normal. "Ursin Volkov has already agreed to entertain the concept of an offer. If we make one, and he accepts, Erico, you'd be king of a motherfucking empire. No one in the world would dare oppose us."

The Bratva makes the *Famiglia* look like a joke and even I have to admit that. Two days ago, I might have taken this offer. A dangerous,

precarious one, but Vanessa over Aurora *would* be more beneficial, and I trust Father's decisions, even when I've doubted him in the past. All he's ever done in his time as Boss was make the *Famiglia* an organization I'd be proud to lead, and with the Bratva connections…

But that was before a fucking siren with red hair flashed her eyes at me.

The image on his desk evaporates, the woman being swapped out with Ariella. Instead of black hair, I see red. Instead of a dark gown, I'm seeing a jade one.

"I've already agreed to the arrangement. If I turn around and deny Ariella, the Corsettis have full rights to attack."

Father stabs his finger into Vanessa's picture. "If we gain the Bratva, then war will be worth it. We'll have them on our side and can wipe out the Corsettis for good. We'd claim control of Montreal too at that point."

So much power. So much control. It's tempting. Like a ripe apple, waiting to be bit, but I've made my decision. To even consider taking the stranger in the image as my bride makes my stomach churn. To witness the disappointment on Ariella's face when she learns her offer was declined after being accepted. Not when I still have so much to uncover about the woman.

"I said no, Father." Finality rings in my tone. "But we can still marry Vanessa to someone else in the *Famiglia*. Caladin is single." Just the way my cousin enjoys it for his own personal reasons. "I'm marrying Ariella Lambert, as agreed upon with both her and Nico Corsetti in a week. The ceremony will be held in their house, in Montreal, if you and Mother would like to join me."

Father scoffs. "That's it then? I offer you the world and you opt for a mute woman who won't be able to provide what you need."

"Stop," I demand, biting the inside of my mouth until I taste blood, to prevent from saying what I *really* want to. "She'll be fine."

Father laughs, throwing his head back. "Fuck, Erico, please tell me you're not pussy-whipped already. The *Famiglia* will demand your complete attention. You know this."

"And they have it. But just because she's not a Corsetti by blood doesn't mean you have the right to insult her. She'll still be my wife." I pause before admitting, "Father, she *volunteered* to this."

"And?" He rolls his head in a half-shrug. "That's a power play move on her part. After seeing her sister with a mob boss, maybe she wants her

own.”

Maybe, but the little I know of Ariella tells me that isn’t it. I don’t *know* why she agreed to the wedding, but I doubt it’s for power.

“Or not. Maybe she’s simply loyal as fuck, and we could benefit from having that on our side.”

Father’s eyes roll and he reluctantly re-places the image of Vanessa back into the drawer. “Loyal or stupid. Something feels off about this, Erico.”

“Then I’ll figure it out,” I promise. After the wedding.

He levels his stare. “If you’re certain about your decision, you’ll be the one telling your mother the wedding she’s in the thick of planning for you and Aurora needs to be cancelled.”

He tosses his head back because we both know how that conversation will go.

After an annoying meeting with my mother, a meeting with Ariella’s future bodyguard, and then a phone call with the mansion’s housekeeper, I head from my condo down to the private garage for only Caladin and me, since he lives on the level beneath me. Instead of bed, which is the only place I should be headed after the gruelling day of flying from Montreal to New York, I slide into the front seat of my favourite car, my custom-painted matte black Porsche 918 Spyder.

There’s nothing better than the feel of the leather wheel, the rumble of speed as the thin tires fly me over the cement and down the connecting roads, the pure power as everything around me blurs while I speed toward Brooklyn.

Father would kill me if he knew my extra-curricular activities.

Watch me care.

Ariella

When I was a little girl, I dreamed of this.

Well, not *this* exactly.

I imagined standing in front of a mirror with Della by my side and our mother on my other as they fussed over me. I'd be wearing a large, white wedding dress with a long train. They'd hand me the bouquet of red roses before walking me out to my chosen groom.

Instead, I get the bleaker, modified version of that dream, but really, after the disappointment that my life has become the past few years, this outcome is almost expectant.

Della's arms weave around my shoulders, hugging me from behind. In our reflection, her eyes dim, matching her frown. "Smile, Ariella. Please. A single smile so I'm able to let you go today."

For her, anything. My lips curl up and I search for something cheery to cling to, to force happiness into my heart. "You chose well," I compliment, gesturing to the white dress I'm donned in.

Nico and Erico had agreed to a small ceremony, which I'm thankful about, though annoyed neither asked me what I wanted. Either way, my decisions would have been the same, so at least Erico and I are on the same page. My plan was to wear whatever semi-decent thing I found in my closet, but at Della's insistence, I found myself dress shopping. She was the

one fighting the hardest to get me out of the union, but she begrudgingly accepted it and has instead tried to make me content in any miniscule way she can.

Is happiness even in the cards for me? Truly.

Dress shopping provided a sense of normality I appreciated. Even Aurora accompanied us, showering me with constant apologies. She's the one who refused to wed Erico and she's taking all the blame on my offer, even if it's misplaced.

The dress Della picked out is lovely. A soft, white silk going to my knees and leaving my shoulders bare. My hair's been left down and loose, and my makeup simple. Today's a formality and nothing more.

Della releases me after a final peck on the cheek. "Well, I should go downstairs and let everyone know you're ready. Come down whenever, although I recommend sooner rather than later or else Erico might come hunting for you."

Unlikely.

Either way, I wave as she exits my bedroom and leaves me alone for the last time.

I study the room that's been home for a short time. Since Erico's insisting on leaving for New York right away, I'm already packed and my bags were brought down earlier, returning this room to being the guest room it once was.

When I leave the room, it's with a tug on my heart. This will be the final time I walk from this doorway, walk the halls, descend the staircase. By tonight, it'll be a different staircase, different hallways, and another bedroom doorway.

By the time I reach downstairs, it'll be the beginning of the end. Of nothing. Of losing any meagre chance I *might* have once had for a natural happy ever after as I chase my designed one.

Erico arrived over an hour ago, but I haven't seen him yet. Della said his parents didn't join him, which makes me both terrified and pleased. Terrified because if not today, there will come a time I'll have to meet them. But pleased, I won't have to interact with them quite yet. His cousin, a man no one here has met before, came too.

At the base of the stairs, I study the house, knowing it's one more hallway until the ballroom, where everyone waits. The very room that

began all of this. The space Della's engagement party was held in and what initiated Erico and me meeting.

A short walk. A few dozen steps and I'm right there. The arched entranceway showing the makeshift aisle the people in attendance created.

My eyes go to the end. To *who's* at the end.

When Della walked down the aisle, Nico's entire focus was on her. His love for her, his weakness apparent. No one in attendance could question their feelings for one another.

That's nothing like the look Erico is giving me.

Appreciation, sure, as his gaze travels the length of me. He settles on my hair for a beat longer than the rest, and I long to touch it, to shield it from his probing examination.

Checking out his purchase.

Instead, I study the people in attendance as they form an aisle, urging me from one end to my fiancé's side. Rozelyn and Flynn are closest to me. Flynn only watches on and Rozelyn manages a half-smile before glancing at her feet, the relationship between her and everyone else still strained. Beside them, Rosen bobs his head and Aurora's guilt is unhidden. A pinched expression as she mouths, *I'm sorry*, for what's likely the millionth time.

To my right is Caterina and Lorenzo. Lorenzo tips his head in respect as I pass, but it's Caterina's tight expression that holds my attention. Similar to that of her daughter, she glances away from me toward Erico, her glare apparent. Beside them, Rafael's usual smirk is watered down, and Isabelle, who I barely know, simply observes.

Closest to the front is Nico, and he's who gains much of my attention. His head dip is even deeper than Lorenzo's, his expression a mixture of the respect of his parents and the apology of his sister.

Della's at the front, beside the minister, standing as my only bridesmaid and one of the witnesses. She's not hiding her sour expression at all, and for a moment, I feel like laughing, if only my face muscles were working still.

To the right of the minister and Erico is another man. His dark hair is messy, like he's just rolled out of bed. He's expressionless, almost bored, rocking lightly on his feet. That must be Erico's cousin that Della had mentioned.

And finally, I look at the reason behind this entire façade. Erico's gaze still remains flat, but I search for something. Appreciation, guilt—any

emotion indicating who I'm about to wed.

I'm by his side much too soon, and take my place between Erico and Della, each representing a time in my life—the past and the future. Giving my back to Della is like literally turning away from my past, but we both know that's exactly what's happening. I'll no longer be Ariella Lambert, the quiet daughter, the silent sister, the shadow. I'll be dragged from my darkness to be Ariella—

My thoughts cut off. Even saying it in my head is unsettling. Ariella Rossi.

In mere minutes, *that* will be my new identity. Wife. American.

I'll no longer be able to exist in the background because I'll be to Erico what Della is to Nico. A mob boss's wife.

My thoughts create a tornado of emotion inside me that I can't breathe through, or escape. My standard gloom is always present and never evading, but it's matched with a feeling of…of concern for my future?

A gentle touch breaks through the thoughts. Erico's fingers brush the back of my hand as his head tilts a fraction in question. His brows follow, and I curse myself for allowing my walls to lower and emotions to spill out for anyone to see.

They're my protection. They're how I was able to go undetected at the medical centre. How I've hid my diagnosis for years from my own sister and the very inquisitive crime family we've moved in with.

"Are we ready to begin?" the minister asks. I nod, and so does Erico. "Very well then."

Thankfully, his speech goes quickly and then it's a matter of the vows. I've written no personal ones and I doubt Erico has either, so the minister goes through the standard vows until it's time for the *I do's*.

That's when I stop breathing.

Erico speaks first, his hands finding mine with those two powerful words. He's likely ensuring I can't escape, but he's also grounding me. Keeping me present through everything he promises me.

Fake, empty promises said for the minister's sake and not mine.

Della reaches forward to hand me a simple, gold band. It's heavy, likely expensive, and I slide it onto the fourth finger of his left hand.

Then it's my turn and the minister repeats himself.

I do, I mouth.

Erico takes my left hand and slides a diamond ring on my finger, which I lose my breath at. A single large diamond in the centre of a thin, gold band. On either side, smaller emerald jewels.

It's beautiful.

But then I remember who this ring was supposed to go to. No doubt, Erico bought it because it reminded him of Aurora's green eyes. Drawing my hand away, I ignore the weight of his ownership and let it hang by my side and away from view.

The minister has no issue with the fact I hadn't said the words aloud, which tells me someone here warned him of my troubles. He nods with a gentle smile and then seals our agreements with the last officiating statement: "You may now kiss the bride."

Kiss. I hadn't thought about this part.

Idiot, he's marrying you to eventually breed you. Not for your stellar personality.

Erico's hand goes to my hip as he steadies me. He pauses, his eyes searching mine, although I'm not sure what for. Seeking permission? Already gave that the moment I agreed to the union.

This has to happen…so I lift onto my toes because even in the heels, I'm still shorter than him. My hands land on his arms, the rich material of his suit like silk. It's then I realize, the last time I kissed someone was… *Fuck, I don't even remember.* That's how long it's been.

His other hand cups my face the same way he had inside Nico's office last week. With his hold, I'm trapped. He brings me closer and lowers his head.

For some reason, I imagined a chaste, cold peck. An unfeeling kiss to seal the unfeeling marriage about unfold.

That's not what I get at all.

Erico's lips press firmly against mine, soft and melding all at the same time. Almost with a vicious roughness, but I wouldn't refer to this kiss as rough by any means. More like, impactful. Telling. Possessive.

I kiss him back.

The tightly strung nerves in my arms, shoulders, and back decompress with every pass of his lips. My fingers curl in his jacket, not as a way to keep him steady, but more so to avoid me touching him. My lips open a fraction, testing, and I feel the gentle touch of his tongue once before he pulls back.

His dark eyes seem even blacker, the colour expanding most of his eye. He's breathing heavy but I'm…

…I'm *breathing.* Genuine air for what feels like the first time in years.

The minister pronounces us husband and wife, and while those terms should be my focus, they're not. Instead, my mind is too busy reliving that kiss. The way, for even a moment, I stopped thinking about everything else. Stopped feeling anything other than his mouth on mine. Stopped hating myself for just a fucking minute.

Maybe this won't be so bad.

The minister gestures toward a small table a few feet away that I hadn't noticed earlier. He directs Erico and I to sign our names, and without thinking twice, knowing at this point, it's too late to turn back, I etch my signature on the line. Della and Erico's cousin sign as witnesses and then it's done.

A marriage certificate. A wedding officiated. A ring of ownership.

A new name: Ariella Rossi.

Erico

Leaving the Corsetti household was an event that took longer than expected, so by the time the Rossi private plane lifts from the airfield, only a stretch away from where the Corsetti's plane is parked, the sun is nearly set, which means we're technically running late.

Ariella takes the couch across from me and Caladin and pulls her legs up, curling into a ball as she stares at the ground. She doesn't hide her emotions now, or perhaps she's thinking about the goodbye she shared with her sister.

Which was partly the reason leaving had taken so long, but since I was robbing this woman of her entire life—the country she's grown up in, the city she's lived in, her newfound family, and the only remaining survivor of her original one—I wasn't going to rush her out the door.

Besides, the look Della continued to throw my way was a threat alone. *Do not rush this or I'll have your balls.*

Della refused to let Ariella go, but it was Ariella who broke contact. She has less reservations coming with me, which only makes me want to know her reasoning more. Whatever's in her head allowed her to go with less emotional turmoil than I expected.

All the Corsetti women took turns hugging her goodbye while the men spoke with Caladin and me. Nico had a few comments about her protection

and well-being but each one of them was cautious to not overstep. Everyone there knows, no matter what they all feel about her now, she's not their concern.

She's *mine*.

I glance at the gold band on my finger, marking me as hers too. A piece of metal I knew I'd eventually wear. Hell, by the end of this month, one way or the other.

I have a fucking wife. Ariella Rossi sounds more right in my head than it should for a marriage that means nothing to me.

When the stewardess from the other end of the plane makes a noise moving around a tray, Ariella jumps. She's barely looked at me since leaving her home. A drive that was prickling with disdain and discomfort as she stared out the window, sitting the farthest from me and my cousin.

Caladin shares a look with me before his attention reverts to his phone. He's barely spoken since we initially arrived to the Corsetti mansion, but I know my cousin well enough to see he's bristling with energy, his unspoken statements about to burst.

With a heavy sigh, I gesture to the back of the plane, to the single, small doorway, and tell her, "There's a room back there if you'd like a nap. Flight's slightly under two hours."

For a moment, it's like she hasn't heard me, but then she rises to her feet and shuffles past us and toward the back of the plane. She enters the small room and shuts the door without looking back.

Once she's gone, Caladin swaps couches from beside me to the one she occupied, grinning. "Well, cuz, your life's about to be interesting."

"Interesting is one way to put it," I murmur, still staring at the door.

"She's barely looked at you since the *I do's*."

"Yeah," I agree, recalling the ceremony. Through it, I couldn't stop thinking about my bride. Wondering what her dreams were and how badly marrying me would shatter them. She looked away from the ring fast enough, which I hate to admit was a punch to the gut after I spent all week getting the perfect one custom made. The emeralds beside the classic diamond remind me of the dress she wore when we met.

"Still leaving tonight?"

"Shh. And yes." I haven't told Ariella yet because I'm uncertain if she'll be pleased or not.

We won’t have a traditional wedding night, even if our kiss made me second-guess my decision on the matter. It was a kiss I expected to be stiff and cold, but instead, she kissed me back. I swear, something in her turned on because I saw a tiny light as I pulled away. As quick as it was there, though, it was snuffed out. In that second, I made her another silent vow.

To turn that light back on.

If she was so responsive over a kiss, what would she be like in my bed, on her back? No—riding me. Witnessing her take charge of our pleasure; the speed, the depth, the intensity. The image of Ariella bouncing on my cock, her wild hair free, bombards my mind. It’s only my cousin’s voice that keeps me present before I accidentally go begin our honeymoon in the plane’s tiny room.

“Well, I wish you luck on that. Who knows what the heads are gonna demand of you this time.”

“You may as well sit in on it too. Fly down with me.”

He groans again. “Or I could not, and not subject myself to spending more time with them than I have to. Better things to do than review paperwork.”

My brow arches. “Like continuing to fuck your way through New York?”

He shrugs. “You’re off the market now, so someone’s gotta take charge. Besides, you’re leaving your new wife all alone on her wedding night…” He trails off, his salacious grin earning his death—even if I know he’s only fucking with me.

My leg darts out and kicks his shin. Between the two of us, he’d win hand-to-hand simply because the guy spends half his life in a gym and the other half in an underground fighting ring. But my kick is sufficient to make my point.

It does based on his chuckle. “Already possessive over her? That didn’t take long.”

“Whatever,” I scoff. “It’s not possession when I already own her ass.” I lift my left hand, wiggling my ring finger with my point.

“Say that a bit louder, why don’t you. She might not have heard you.”

My gaze darts to the bedroom, wondering if she’s awake or not. Lying there and listening in on this conversation, or if she’s unable to hear us over the engine noise.

Caladin's laughter fades when he catches where I'm looking. "Serious talk. You sure about this?"

"Too late now. Paper's signed and everything. Ariella ensures a partnership with the Corsettis. Any attack now means we have our northern partners. You saw them today; she's adored by the entire family. They'll fiercely protect her, Della most of all, and Della has sway over Nico, so they'll never back down from helping us if it means her potential safety. Contrary to my father's beliefs, Ariella's a wise move."

A chess piece. That's all she is to me.

Caladin nods slowly as I speak, digesting everything. "Hm, yeah, I agree. What's her story though? The mutism thing is a bit…interesting."

"None of your business." The last thing I plan on doing is discussing her traumas with him, especially while she's within earshot.

Caladin only chuckles again and glances out the window to his right. "Whatever, cuz. You do you."

When the plane lands under two hours later, I stand to retrieve Ariella from the back. The door hasn't opened the entire flight, and I assume she's fallen asleep.

Caladin walks the opposite way. "I'll ensure her bags get unloaded and will meet you in the car."

Inside the small bedroom, I find her curled up on her side, the blanket pulled over her entire body.

"Ariella."

Nothing.

I gently tug the blanket from her shoulder, revealing her face first, and then the rest of her body. She must feel the difference in air temperature, but if she does, she shows no sign. Strands of her hair lie over her face and I flick them off, revealing what she fell asleep hiding.

Dried teardrops stain her cheeks. Not many, which tells me she didn't cry for long, but still, the sight of them makes my own throat tighten with emotion in a way I've *never* felt before.

I've never felt protective over a woman whatsoever, but despite the situation surrounding our new relationship, I want to keep Ariella safe, for

reasons more than the surname she now bears. I want to ensure she doesn't cry again, especially when we both entered the union with eyes wide open.

My finger strokes over her cheek once, then twice, and finally her lashes flutter. Her mouth parts in a small yawn and she stretches. The movement makes her breasts rise from the simple dress she wore for the ceremony. The white is beautiful and in many ways made her red hair bolder, like the green silk had.

"We've arrived."

She blinks up at me, first with a furrowed brow and then with widening eyes, as though forgetting and then remembering all in the same flash of where she is, why she's here, and who I am to her.

Stretching my hand out, I offer her the support to sit, and then eventually stand. She's slow coming up, her arms bending to stretch with her movements. A sleepy but almost genuine smile finds me and I commit it to memory, wondering if this is what she'll look like every morning.

"Come on." I lead her from the plane's bedroom and past the couches, and by the pilot who dips his head in acknowledgment. "Careful on the steps."

The sun's plunged low in the sky, making it dark with a slight glow. The airfield is lit up with the tall lights fixed around so I have faith she won't fall, but still, my pace is slower than normal, ensuring I'm there to catch her tumble if she missteps.

The door to the black town car is already open, and my driver, Matthew, stands beside it. Presuming Caladin is already seated and her bags already stowed in the trunk, I gesture for her to enter first. She does after the slightest hesitation, her gaze skirting the empty field. I wonder if she's thinking about the fact she's no longer in Montreal. Or if she's regretting this now. I wonder everything that's in her head.

And hate that I care.

Caladin's tucked in the farthest corner, head buried in his phone, having claimed the bench behind the driver's seat. Ariella presses herself against the left side of the car, leaving ample space for me.

"Want to be dropped off at the condo?" I offer, my less-than-subtle hint saying my cousin won't be coming home with us.

Caladin smirks without looking up from his phone. "That'll work, sure."

Ariella shows no interest in the hour-long drive from our private airfield in New Jersey to Manhattan. Perhaps growing up in a chaotic city too, she's

used to the bustle, the traffic, the honking, and the crowds dangerously walking into traffic in their rush. If it differs at all from Montreal's chaos or if it's quite similar, her expression gives no indication as she keeps a stoic stare out the window and ignores us. I want to ask her if she's ever left Canada before, but don't. Like a deer, I could spook her and then I'll be back at ground zero.

Besides, my wondering needs to end. No more caring about the woman who's merely an accessory. It's all Aurora would have been to me; therefore, it's what Ariella and I *will* be.

When the car finally stops in front of the *Famiglia*-owned condo building Caladin and I both live in, I get out of the vehicle to allow Caladin by. Ariella remains inside, pressing far to the other side.

"Not coming up?" He gestures toward the upper floors.

I shake my head. "She'll be staying at the family mansion. Makes more sense. It's safer and she'll like it more."

In a lower voice, he whisper-yells, "And maintains the distance between you two. Be honest."

I only nod. He slaps me on the arm and heads toward the glass entrance doors, equipped with a doorman, who greets him as he strides inside.

Once seated again, I command Matthew to drive us to the mansion, and Ariella stiffens but doesn't face me.

It makes for a long three-hour drive through the city's traffic and out toward the Hamptons, passing numerous smaller towns on our way. All beautiful and picturesque in their own way. They manage to keep Ariella's attention, as her hands fiddle with the edge of her phone case, composing a rhythmic sound that fills the car. A sound I find oddly soothing.

Once we enter the Hamptons, the houses get more spaced out. Each one large, each one with a huge amount of property. Grass on one side, the ocean waterfront on the other. The Rossi mansion is at the very end, owning a massive stretch of the island, right on the edge of the water.

As we approach, Ariella's expression finally breaks into amazement, making me smile. At least, she'll enjoy her new home. There's a bit of pride that she enjoys where I'm locking her inside. Through any window of the newly-renovated mansion, she's likely to see the ocean so hopefully, she enjoys water.

I could ask her, but her tiny gasp fills the silence, as we drive up the long driveway and around the circular water fountain maintained in the

centre of the roundabout. The sound tells me she’s mentally present.

“Welcome to your new home.”

Ariella

My first immediate thought is to deny his claim because this isn't my home.

But then my inner voice reminds me, *It is since the moment you sent that text to Nico.*

My second thought is how much nicer Erico's mansion is compared to Nico's. The Corsetti mansion is beautiful in an old-fashioned, dark brick, castle-y kind of way, but Erico's home is downright gorgeous in its modernity. Cut lines, glass windows making up many walls, and yet, I can't make anything out through the windows, telling me they're one-way. And likely bulletproof too, given its occupants.

"It was recently redone," Erico states, gesturing out the car window. "It used to look similar to the Corsetti mansion, a style my parents really enjoyed, but I like to be able to see the ocean easily."

An oceanfront property? Once we hit the sign advertising this as being the Hamptons, it's no different than most of the other houses we've passed. Yet, I don't taper my glee with another dream coming true: to live by the water. It's an expensive one I long realized I'd never have. The fantasy of writing music in a large room overlooking the ocean often kept my mind busy.

You have that now. But you shoved yourself onto a man who already owned that life. This isn't an accomplishment.

Any of the excitement making my chest lighter moments ago evaporates in a blink.

Erico climbs out of the back seat and stretches his hand for me to take. I ignore it, instead standing on my own, staring around the wide-open space. The massive property with neatly trimmed grass and the salty scent of the water *right* there. It's visible over the land, against the skyline of the house. Just a couple inches of dark blue, but still, present.

Erico gestures toward the front entrance. "Come. You'll get a tour tomorrow."

Tomorrow. Right. It's our wedding night.

Fuck.

That's the traditional activity, right? Erico put his ring on my finger and now he gets to fuck his vows into me. Consummate the marriage and begin impregnating me.

Based on the sealing kiss of our wedding vows and his overall demeanor, I suspect he fucks well. So many years have passed since the last time I've had sex that I'm sure I'm all dried up now. Hell, his kiss today was the first moment of intimacy in a while. Perhaps that's why it felt so good; it was simply my body reacting to cravings finally being met.

But this feels wrong, and my feet are grounded to the driveway. Having sex tonight crosses something off on his wedding checklist, rather than him wanting it—craving *me*.

Does that matter? That little voice slips into the cracks of my true feelings with that consideration.

After a second, Erico shoots me an annoyed look and returns to my side, taking my wrist to tug me. His hand feels the same as the ring circling my finger—entrapping and permanent.

He only releases me once we're inside the building, when he pulls me to a stop in front of two people who couldn't be more different from one another. One an elderly, stout woman. Her dark hair is done up in a tight bun and her light blue, summer dress falls nearly to her ankles. She immediately throws me a welcoming smile that eases some of the tightness inside my chest.

Beside her is—I blink. *Holy hotness*. A guy—a man. He doesn't look much older than me, but he's standing pin straight, dressed in a black suit,

his hands behind his back, his legs slightly spread. Based on his demeanor, and my knowledge of the Corsetti household, I suspect he's a guard. He watches me, and dare I say it, an appreciation courses through his blue eyes. His blond hair is tucked behind his ears, perfectly groomed.

I look from him to my new husband, whose intense gaze bores into me. The stranger and him are nearly complete opposites as well. While Erico is dark, the stranger is light. Both might be dressed in a suit, but they wear them differently. Erico emits an angry vibe while friendliness radiates from the stranger.

Being mute means observing people, becoming familiar with people's tells, their attitudes, their vibes, all based on their stance, expression, and projection of self.

Erico clears his throat and gestures to the woman. "This is Carlotta. She's my housekeeper and can give you a tour of the grounds tomorrow. Any questions about the house, she'll be able to assist."

Why not you?

Idiot, because he's already stated what life will be like. Two separate lives fused beneath one, miserable household and the vows that bind us.

"Pleasure to meet you." Carlotta smiles warmly.

"And this is Sebastian." Erico motions to the suited stranger, whose grin expands with the introduction. "I've assigned him to be your bodyguard. He will be around the mansion when you are here, will drive you anywhere you wish to go, and will accompany you to those places. I'm sure you've pieced together that my role comes with enemies, so Sebastian will ensure none of them get near you."

"Happy to be of service, ma'am," Sebastian says, his hand stretching toward mine to shake.

Not a fan of *ma'am* as a moniker, but we'll get to that another time. I take his hand, which is so much larger than mine, in a quick shake. When Erico makes a noise, I drop it, his warmth quickly evaporating away, and I instead nod a final greeting.

"For now," Erico cuts in, "I'll show you to our room."

Our room. At least, he's not forcing me to sleep separate from him. That counts for something, right? With his body beside me, my head and heart can be tricked into thinking this is a normal marriage.

Erico leads me toward the twin staircases that curve up the side of the wall to the upstairs level. We take the right side, but my gaze wanders the

higher up we ascend.

Wow. The second floor has two halves with a single hallway-bridge connecting them. I glace to our right, toward where a set of double doors hide the rest of the mansion, and then to the left, where I catch the sight of a large bed through the doorway.

Instead of focusing on that though, the height of the second floor allows me to see the massive floor-to-ceiling windows that begin on the floor beneath us and stretch to the very top of the mansion. A huge wall of light pours in, but what mostly catches my attention is the body of water through it.

Breathtaking.

"Ariella." Erico's firm command breaks my stare as he's standing in the doorway to what I presume is the bedroom. He gestures for me to enter first, so I do, marvelling at the same kind of window in it.

When Nico showed me the bedroom I'd be living in, my mind was blown over its beauty. It was larger than any room I've had before, with a lovely view of the grounds outside, and the forest in the distance.

But this…this is ethereal. Double, no *triple,* what I had at Nico's. An apartment on its own. To my right, a sitting area with high back chairs that seem more expensive than the rent I once fought to contribute to. My eyes sweep over them toward the main attraction: the king-sized bed made up of an emerald green bedspread. The bed's wooden posts are dark, stretching high to the vaulted ceiling, where a black canopy acts as a covering.

I've always wanted a canopied bed.

Ironic.

Tearing my gaze away, I inspect the massive space that could fit easily another handful of king-sized beds. The wall across from the bed boasts an electric fireplace and a flatscreen. To the right of the fireplace is two doors, and I wander toward them, peeking inside. A bathroom in one, probably about the size of mine at the Corsetti's, and a closet in the other. Women's clothes hang on one side of the closet, shelves of shoes that probably aren't even my size.

Bought for Aurora most likely.

With that grim thought, I study the opposite side of the closet, lined mainly with dark clothing. Suits and workout gear seem to be the focus, but one thing's obvious: it's men's clothing.

When Erico said we wouldn’t be a regular couple, I believed we’d have separate bedrooms. I don’t know how I feel about this. Conflicted, mainly, since some part of me is pleased to have this shared space, a place we can attempt to ever be more. But another part of me wishes for my own room, so I can bury my head and be miserable whenever the realization that I’ve subjected myself to a loveless marriage gets too much.

In a single statement, Erico tosses that entire conflict away. “Most of the time, you’ll have this room to yourself. Remember, I mentioned that during the week, I’ll be staying at my condo. Being in the city is more convenient for work.”

Right. Guess there’s no reason for the emotional conflict. There’s nothing to feel bad about. No choice. Pretending this is a regular marriage is useless when he won’t even be living here during the week. He’ll be the stranger who comes home on weekends, fucks his heir into me, and then leaves to do whatever he needs to. I’ll be a convenience factor.

Before the self-deprecating thoughts grow again, I turn away to study the far wall. Like my room in the Corsetti mansion, this one too is made up of windows. Dark green curtains are pulled back to reveal the ocean beyond. Water fills the view, and I imagine falling asleep to this. Much better than the forest I once stared at. Gentle waves slosh to the side of the land, kissing the edge, before dipping back down.

Suddenly, Erico speaks but not to me. A murmured short conversation I don’t turn around for, and then they’re gone, based on Erico’s silence.

Then the door shuts and my spine prickles with complete awareness.

Why does this feel like a death march?

I *chose* this and now I have to live with it. Live in unhappiness that I’m not this man’s first choice, or even second. Survive through the pain that this will be the only romance I’ll ever see, and without him, I wouldn’t have any other options.

Sex will be an act. A task that begins tonight to produce his heir. Without feeling and emotion, without either of us actually caring for one another. The beginning to the next chapter of my lonely life.

What did I do?

Erico’s footsteps bring him deeper into the room and my eyes flash to the windows. With the setting sun, the windows reveal enough of a reflection, I’m able to watch him come up behind me—not that I need to observe when I feel the sweep of his eyes over my back. With the dress my

sister picked, the backing is low so when he sees me roll my shoulders, trying to rid myself of the ticklish sensation, he witnesses my feeble attempt.

He comes up behind me, his heat making my head swim. Or is that nerves? His hand lifts, and he drags a finger down the centre of my spine until reaching the dress's edge. This is where he unzips me, I'm sure. Will he lay me down on that huge bed or will it be done right here, standing?

His touch disappears and—

Thump.

"Your bag."

My attention flies toward my feet, where, sure enough, my single bag of everything I own has been dropped. It only holds my focus for a brief second because the sound of Erico's steps moving farther away steals it.

He walks right to the bedroom doors and just when I expect he'll lock it—lock us in for the night—he instead opens them, pausing in the threshold.

"I have to go down to Vegas for a bit. Might be two nights, could be a week. Not sure what's happening until I arrive. I can text you, if you'd like."

He's leaving? *Now?* Why does my throat end up in my stomach when this reprieve should be everything I want?

I glance at the bed. A symbol for what should have happened but is now the dividing line between us.

I should feel only contentment, but instead, I'm perplexed with myself.

My mouth opens, and right when I think I *might* actually be able to talk, the voice inside my mind creeps into my consciousness again.

Fear—

Death—

Silence—

It's better to be silent and not witness what you've lost.

The bag at my feet has my phone and it'd be so easy to retrieve it and text him my question, but I don't because my body doesn't allow movement. All I can do is observe as Erico presses his lips together and nods, seemingly accepting the fact I won't respond in any non-verbal method either.

"Make yourself at home. Go anywhere. Do anything, Ariella. Please don't coop yourself up in this room. Before your bag was brought up, I had someone program Sebastian and Carlotta's cell numbers into your phone so

you can easily get a hold of them, or simply for conversation. They are both aware you will not speak with them and all my men have been instructed to give you space. Provided they obey, the only soldier you should be seeing over the next few days is Sebastian." He stops, his gaze skirting the room and then finding me. His mouth opens. Shuts. Opens. Finally: "I'm headed right back to the plane. Have a good night, Ariella."

Then he's gone and the door is shut behind him.

He said not to coop myself up in here, but in that motion—the door shutting with his absence—it feels like *he* has. A single pane of wood blocks me from him—from his escape. From this marriage.

Erico's obviously following the declaration he made the other day and I respect that. This will be the simplest, most non-obligatory arranged marriage ever.

Yet, the blackness creeps over me. Over my vision, my mind…my heart, making me gutted. Hollow and alone.

More alone than normal.

Why did I volunteer for this? I don't know—to find *someone* in this shitty life Mom dragged me and Della into. Maybe I thought Erico could be that person. Maybe that's why as much as having sex out of obligation isn't appealing, a small part of me hoped that tonight could have been the beginning of more.

My legs give out right as I make it to the window, and with my back against the pane, I slide to the floor, drawing my knees up.

I'm so stupid.

Tears form, the burning sensation so familiar, being they're a regular occurrence. I'm the only woman in history crying about the freedom associated with an arranged marriage; yet, they continue to fall.

Because even when I force a man down the aisle, he wants nothing to do with me. Yesterday, in between Della's last-minute ditch effort to change my mind, Caterina cut in with advice that still rings in my ears.

"Once, my sister told me to make Enzo into the prince I wanted. Do that with Erico. This arranged marriage isn't the end. It can *be happy."*

Her advice lodged uselessly in my heart. Useless because Erico already made his stance known.

Still…maybe I want some happiness in this darkness. The shadows followed me since I was fourteen, always struggling to feel joyful. When my sister was cheery, mine was fake. For her, for Mom, and eventually, for

everyone else. Stefano, Rozelyn, and Yasmine, when meeting them. The medical staff at the centre. The Corsettis when they took me in. Most likely assume that keeping my head down is a trauma response, but reality is, it's my mind struggling to remain present and not to succumb.

No one will choose me. Not even my own husband.

The ring gets warm around my finger, as though the memory of earlier today finally returns. I curl my hand into a fist, feeling the gold and the weight of the jewels. A ring not even meant for me…

Scoffing, I rip it from my finger and toss it to my right, into the room's corner. The overhead light catches on the diamond at the exact angle I'm taunted by the gleam, but I don't care.

Erico doesn't care. As long as I act like his wife outside these walls, the rest doesn't matter. I've willingly chained myself to a man who'll never give me a happy ending.

Masochism much. I did this to myself, and this is the price I'll pay.

At least being away from Della, with an ocean around you and music to compose will keep you from following the dejection into the darkness forever.

With a heavy sigh, I wipe the tears away and reach for my bag, rooting around until finding my cell phone. A few messages sit waiting, all from Della. Demands to contact her as soon as I can. Questions about the flight, about the mansion, and mainly about Erico's treatment.

What treatment? Does leaving count?

I swipe them all away and open my messaging app regardless, finding the thread I've yet to delete even knowing I should. If Della or even Nico knew about who I've been trying to reach, they'd be pissed.

I begin typing:

> Hey. You won't respond because you haven't to all the other messages I've sent, but stuff's changed in the past few days. I'm married. I volunteered for this, to take the place of Aurora Corsetti in her engagement to Erico Rossi from New York. Stupid, right? This is me letting you know, and I'd love to get your opinion on how dumb I am. When I should be running away from this lifestyle, I did exactly as Della did and married right into it. I miss you. I hope you're safe and okay, and again, I know you won't respond. You probably don't even have your phone anymore. But I continue to message on the slim chance one day you'll answer. Anyway…yeah.

That one gets delivered and it’ll remain unread, as did the previous dozen. Scrolling up, I reread everything I’ve typed over the past few weeks. The check-ins. The updates about progress within Corsetti’s household. The begging and pleading.

My thumb strokes over the top of my screen, right where her name is.

YASMINE DE FALCO.

Erico

Contrary to what I said to Ariella, I don't leave the mansion right away. First, I check in with Carlotta to give a few instructions over the kinds of food Ariella enjoys, which I'm only aware of because Nico gained a report from Della at my request.

Then I head to my office for a private conversation with Sebastian. I won't be here for long, so I don't bother getting comfortable, and instead perch on the edge of my desk as he enters, stress tightening his face.

Sebastian has been inducted into the *Famiglia* for three years now and has proven himself to be a proficient, useful soldier. Meaning, he obeys orders really fucking easily. At twenty-five, I chose him thinking it might be nice for Ariella to have someone closer to her age, to ease her into her life here, but based on the appreciation in her gaze earlier when I introduced them, I'm second-guessing my choice.

"Sir," he greets, stopping halfway through the room. His hands fuse behind his back.

"Thanks for coming." I keep my voice smooth and eased. "I'll be heading to Vegas right away. Not sure how long I'll be gone. It's for the quarterly meeting, but you've heard how these go. Once there, more shit gets brought up and the next thing I know, days will pass." If I didn't enjoy them so much, I'd despise attending. They're a pain, a task, but there's a

sign of strength in them. A symbol of my control. “While I’m gone, ensure Ariella leaves her room.”

According to Nico, she’s a quiet woman who enjoyed hiding often in her room. In his house, I can understand why she would, but despite mine being new to her, she’ll be alone for the next few days; therefore, there’s little excuse for her to hide. I *want* her to emerge and become familiar with the property because it’ll only save her future pain.

“Got it.”

“And you will inform me when she does.”

He nods again, his throat moving with his hard swallow. Perhaps, in that motion, he’s hiding his true feelings about my request. Not that my own are any different. There is no plausible reason for wanting to know what she does in her day. Maybe it’s guilt, but something nags at me to *want* to know.

There’s also no reason I put her in my room. With my wedding to Aurora approaching at the end of the month, I had a suite across the house set aside. The very room I initially was going to re-assign to Ariella, but the moment she walked down the aisle toward me was the moment I changed my mind. Once again, there’s no exact reasoning behind my actions besides a blatant desire to see her in my bed, my silk sheets hugging her body.

With the moment re-imbedding into my mind, the rest of the ceremony does too. Today felt fucking *real*. The dress she was in made a statement: that despite walking into a loveless marriage, she created something realistic. Her family made her an aisle for her to walk down.

A part of her wanted what happened today. The same part that led her to volunteer for it.

When I wasn’t gazing at her, I was studying Nico and Lorenzo, seeking some sign that this was a ploy on their part, but found only guilt on both men’s faces. It made me feel better about accepting her offer and declining Father’s. Lorenzo stared at Ariella with respect and Nico a mix of respect and guilt, and when he slid to me, wariness. No one in that room wanted the wedding…except Ariella.

Her reasoning is elusive. Confusing, since all she’s done tonight is look at me like I’d eat her alive. The second we entered my bedroom, she kept staring at the bed, and it’s obvious where her mind was.

It was where mine had gone too. On the activities that happen between a man and wife on their wedding night.

What I couldn’t figure out is if it was fear or longing she felt. There was a flicker of disappointment in her eyes when I announced leaving for Vegas, but it cleared for relief.

I’m puzzled over her confusing emotions and in my role, that is bad. Reading people is simple. Necessary too. But my elusive wife is confounding.

Which makes her dangerous.

“Sir, are you okay?”

I blink, coming back to the present, to my office with Sebastian. See, dangerous. Just thinking about her distracts me.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Let me know what she fills her days with.”

“Do you want her to be aware of my presence or remain hidden?”

I hesitate, once again re-living the look in her eyes when she met him. Not that I believe Sebastian will act upon anything, even if I saw the same appreciation reflected in his. He knows better because he’s aware of the consequences. But still, I don’t like this doubt.

What do you expect of her? A loveless marriage and for her to take no lover in all these years?

My jaw clamps with the thought. No. No, I hadn’t thought that far ahead. With Aurora, my plan was to impregnate her as soon as possible and then free her. But I doubt that’s an option with Ariella. She’s too…too gentle. Too wary and jumping on her—literally—would make me a villain in her eyes. More than I likely already am.

For some reason, I don’t want that.

“Yes,” I finally respond, my back teeth grinding together, fully aware my agreement to his two-optioned question answers nothing. “Don’t be too obvious but you don’t have to hide. Given what I so far know of her, I think the more she gets to know you, the more amicable she’ll be to having you around. The less she’ll fear you.”

At some point, she might even enjoy his company more than my own.

“But when you’re around, remember whose ring she’s wearing, Sebastian. Whose surname she bears.”

“Sir?” His brows dip, and mine even rise, half-surprised he’s going to pretend I didn’t notice earlier. That’s simply insulting.

“I trust you, Sebastian, and it’s why you were chosen for the task, but if your eyes stray, I will be the final thing you’ll ever see.” I pause, letting the threat hang. Waiting for his stuttered agreement until dismissing him.

He’s a good kid so I have little doubt he’ll obey, but the reminder for us both makes *me* feel better about leaving the city. He’s young, and sometimes youth equals stupidity, and stupidity needs behavioural reminders.

Only when he’s exited my office do I move as well, gathering my phone and checking last-minute emails on my laptop. The latest reply from the private tech company I hired to complete a deep dive background check on Ariella’s family told me it’d be twenty-four hours until they had a response. According to the email, it’s been nearing thirty hours and no response. So I shoot them a less-than-friendly prompt and shut the computer again. They’re hunting for facts I could ask Ariella directly for, but something tells me I need to be better equipped when dealing with her.

Finally finished and ready to go, I exit my office and take the long hallway decorated in paintings of the beach until pausing in the foyer, my gaze sliding up the wall and toward the bedroom doors she’s locked behind.

I wonder if she’s gotten undressed and showered by now. If she’s becoming familiar with my space, and making it hers too. A notion that should irritate me, but instead brings a smile to my face. Despite everything, I don’t want her to hate it here or else it’ll make for a very agonizing marriage.

I turn away and head back outside where Matthew is still waiting by the car, as I instructed him earlier to do. Once we’re both seated and he’s pulling away, the temptation to glance at the house behind me grows with every turn of the wheels, but I stare forward.

Distance will be a good thing. Ariella deserves happiness, and that’s not me. Not a husband who won’t have the time of day for her. Who doesn’t *want* to have the time of day for her. Leaving her behind right away is ideal; it sets the expectations of what’s to come and what not to expect from me.

So why does it feel so fucking wrong?

Vegas. Sin City.

A place filled with tourists who eagerly throw away their hard-earned money on the slim chance of winning big. The saying *the house always wins* is very true. *I* always win. Not them. Once in a while, a lucky

fucker, usually by random chance, will strike a huge win, to ensure our casinos continue to promise prosperity. But it's only ever just enough cash to lure customers to continue gambling on that one percent chance while we rob them of their money.

The *Famiglia* has expanded in recent years, giving us a foothold into some of the southern states, including Vegas. Given the profitable city between the casinos, hotels, clubs, bars, and strip joints that both locals and visitors travel in for, it was an easy takeover and one that's grown our legal holdings exponentially. While the underground scene in Vegas is still strong, the drugs still desired, it's those legal businesses that make Vegas worth our time.

Since the party city is enjoyed by all, it's become the base of so many *Famiglia* meetings, where all the capos from the organization come together and report on profits and dealings to me and Father. Now, only me.

A car waits for me right off the tarmac. The driver doesn't need any direction before taking me toward the same condo complex I always stay at when I'm visiting. We own properties all over the country, in all the cities we frequent, for this very purpose.

When he pulls into the underground parking lot, the time on my phone reads five in the morning. I flew half the night, and my nap on the plane did little to settle my racing thoughts. Since New York is three hours ahead of Vegas, it's already eight in the morning, which means Ariella could be waking soon, if she hasn't already.

Despite the lack of notifications informing me so, I open my messenger app, tapping on a conversation between Sebastian and me, staring at it for a couple seconds, impatiently waiting for the bubbles, indicating he's typing and letting me know she's up.

But there's nothing. Maybe her head is as full as mine was for the entirety of my flight, and she's hiding from her new reality. Either way, when she wakes, if she's not already, it'll be her first official day as an underboss's wife. She'll have new responsibilities. Things I was prepared to shove at Aurora right away, but am hesitating with Ariella. The concept of forcing her into anything sickens me.

I exit the car and head straight for the elevator, typing in the code that'll lift me straight to the private penthouse suite, without stopping at any other floor, regardless if another tenant requests the elevator. Inside, I lean against the deep, wood panelling, exhaustion pulling my eyes down.

Thankfully, Vegas is a quiet city in the morning, and my meeting is this evening. After the day and night I've had, my head needs to be focused, which means sleep is my entire plan for the first half of today.

The second my feet pass the threshold of the penthouse, my phone rings. I hate the little leap my stomach does, hoping to either see Ariella or Sebastian's name—who'll only call in regards to my wife—but the sensation immediately quells at spotting *Mother* on my screen.

My thumb hovers over the red button to end the ringing, but knowing her, she'll continue incessantly until I pick up. So I do, not hiding my dislike with an exaggerated sigh. "What?"

"Good morning to you too, son."

"What?"

"You're cranky. It's a disagreeable look on you. One would think your wife isn't pleasing you well enough."

I shut my eyes, focusing on the breath running through my body before I say what I truly want to. Even though, this is simply my mother. Bitchy, and the first to tear someone down. It's why she managed to keep pace with Father all these years.

"I'm not having this conversation with you." Every word is a punch as I stride through the condo, heading down the hall to the bedroom. The sooner I sleep, the less painful conversations like this will feel.

"Yes, well, sorry to be a burden," she says in the most non-apologetic way a person can manage, "but you are. You were married yesterday."

I glance at the ring on my left hand, a constant reminder. "I'm aware," I reply dryly.

"Don't be smart with me, Erico. I mean, you were married yesterday and I haven't met your wife yet."

That pulls me to a stop in the doorway of the ensuite bathroom, glancing at the phone like I haven't heard her correctly. "The key word in your sentence was yesterday. Did you expect me to drag her from Montreal straight to you?"

"Yes, actually."

Oh, for the love of— I pinch the bridge of my nose, focusing on breathing again. "Well, too bad. Even I'm not that much of an asshole. The woman gave up everything she knew."

"Well, now she'll be running the *Famiglia* alongside you, so I'm not entirely sure it was a chore to do so. She knew what she was agreeing to."

For the first time since answering this call, Mother has stated something I partially agree with. Ariella did walk into this eyes wide open, but it also doesn't mean I was dragging her to my parents first thing.

"You were invited," I remind her. "You could have come to Montreal with Caladin and me and met her then."

"Could have, but I had a nail appointment and your father was busy. We planned for a wedding at the end of the month. You can't expect everyone to drop everything simply because you decided to swap brides as well as the dates."

Always busy. A nail appointment was more important than her son's wedding, but I'm not surprised by this. Just annoyed as I drop the phone to the counter and wash my face, tapping the speakerphone button so this unfortunate conversation can continue.

"Is there a purpose for your call, Mother?" I grit, hands wringing the facecloth imagining it something else entirely. Something I can use to shut her up.

"Yes, there is, actually. As I was saying, since we haven't met her yet, nor has the entire *Famiglia*, your wife will be throwing a party. An introduction for her to the heads and their wives, as well as any of our partners. It'll be a sign that you have your wife, and she's capable of throwing a decent event." Mother pauses, her next question icier than anything she's said thus far. "She can do that at least, can't she?"

Pushing away from the counter, I grab my phone. "You want Ariella to throw her own event to welcome her into the *Famiglia* and that's when you and Father will meet her. You truly think that's best?" Although, a party will mean numerous people for Mother to stress about, which means she can't spend all her time stressing out Ariella. I suppose, there's a win in there somewhere.

"Yes."

"I'll talk with her."

"Erico—"

"Stop," I cut her off. "Just stop. Look, I'm fucking exhausted. You know I'm in Vegas for the next while. I will discuss it with my wife when I'm home because she barely knows her way around my mansion, let alone hosting a party."

There's silence and knowing Mother, there's a million insults she's presently biting her tongue on. Thankfully, she goes with none of them and

instead, in a sour tone, mumbles, “Fine. But there was another reason I called you. Your father wishes to speak with you.”

Oh, good fucking hell, the pain doesn’t end. As the phone shuffles in the background, I kick off my shoes and strip my coat, tossing it onto a nearby settee until I hear a deeper voice replace the shrill of my mother’s.

“Erico.”

“Good morning, Father.” Just speaking with him has my body tensing.

“I won’t be joining you for the meeting, but I will be there after.”

“Okay.” It’s not the first I’ve ran it alone but usually he skips informing me.

“Despite our disagreement the other day over Ariella, I did say a year ago, that with your marriage, I’d be handing you the *Famiglia* as well. Even though that wasn’t supposed to happen until the end of the month, I think now’s the time, son. Time for you to be Boss.”

Boss. Fucking hell. Every thought of Ariella, the conversation with Mother, even my exhaustion as I drop onto the bed is gone. Wiped away by only excitement. Pride. No fear, no nerves. Father’s trained me well.

“Th-thank you,” I manage after a moment. Father did say after I was wed, but my father also changes his mind so often, I’d have no doubt he wasn’t ready for retirement quite yet.

“It’s time,” he repeats.

“Thank you,” I say again, having nothing else to. Nothing else that formulates in my head anyway.

“Do the meeting,” he continues, “and I’ll be there after. With all the heads already in Vegas, I felt it easiest to do it now.”

“Makes sense.”

“Good job, son. I’ll see you soon.” *Click.*

I drop the phone on the bed, staring blankly at the wall in front of me. It’s happening. Soon, I’ll be in control. I’ll be in the exact position my father always trained me to be—his role. Boss.

In the aloneness of the penthouse, I smile. Genuinely smile. Years of fighting, of training, of practicing weapons led to this. The deals, the meetings, the kills, all to get here.

When my phone vibrates against the comforter, I’m not even bothered by it this time.

SEBASTIAN

She’s awake. Just went down for breakfast.

Day one of being an underboss’s wife will be also her final day as such. By tomorrow, she’ll be a Boss’s.

Instead of answering Sebastian’s text, I open another thread and type in her name.

ME:

Good morning, Ariella.

The word beneath my message goes from *delivered* to *read* and an eagerness I’ve never felt before courses through me. Along with a curiosity, to see how she’ll respond. It’ll be in her message I can attempt to decipher how much she despises me.

In the meantime, I finish undressing, keeping one eye on the screen, waiting for her reply to slip into place. After two minutes, she still hasn’t sent one.

ME

Sleep well?

I climb beneath the blankets after prompting her, settling into the bed. Instantly, sleepiness wants to pull me under but the urge for her response keeps me awake.

After another minute, there’s still no reply.

ME

Hope the room was to your liking. Enjoy your day.

Still fucking nothing…

I return to Sebastian’s message and furiously type out a response.

ME

Does she have her phone on her?

SEBASTIAN

Yes. She’s staring at it too.

I know that because of the damn read receipts her phone is sending me. I flip back to the other conversation.

ME

Stop being childish and ignoring me. I know you're on your phone.

That ought to do it.

One minute…

Two…

If this meeting wasn't so important and pre-scheduled, I'd fly right back home and—

Do what? I don't have a reasonable answer for myself, but I'd…I'd show her all the reasons she's not allowed to ignore me.

Another minute and she's obviously not going to respond at this point. My finger hovers over her name to call her, but then decide otherwise, reminding myself the uselessness in it. So what if she's ignoring me? Couples who don't care about one another don't send *good morning* messages to one another. She's reminding me of my own decisions.

So before my exhaustion drives me to make stupid choices, I connect my phone to the charging cord, shut off the lamp, and bury myself in the bed. Right before passing out, the image of red hair and feisty eyes fills my head and it's with those colours, I allow the blackness to steal me.

Ariella

Witnessing Aurora's return to her family was a shitshow, not that I'd react differently if I was in her place. At first, she hid in her bedroom to avoid her family, and while the thought to do the same crosses my mind when I open my eyes, my grumbling stomach coupled with the fact that Erico isn't present convinces me to leave the bed.

But everything feels different. The room I stand in the middle of—not mine. The bathroom I use, noting how all my preferred soaps and items are already stocked, isn't mine. Touching *anything* feels like I'm invading a stranger's space.

Essentially, I suppose, I am.

A stranger with a claim on me.

Day one of being a wife to a man I barely know. Who barely knows me. What do I do with myself? At Nico's, I was allowed to do whatever, but with the ongoing drama my sister wrapped herself into, it was easy to hide away when I wasn't with her. Curled up in bed with my notebook and continuing writing music, an old hobby I only recently started up again.

Sometimes though, when the darkness grew, it made leaving my bedroom impossible. It'd require Della coming to my door and urging me out, completely unaware of why she had to do it. But some mornings, lying with the comforter covering my entire body, staring at only the shade the

blanket provided, was alleviating for the deprecating thoughts repeating on a loop in my head.

None of those accompanied me today.

Despite the unknowns of my life, after finishing in the bathroom, I head right for the massive windows, yanking open the heavy drapes until the sight of the ocean is enough to convince myself of being content.

My wet hair gets wrapped up in a bun because I don't have the energy to care enough to dry it. Similarly, I find leggings and a tank top from *my* bag and avoid all the expensive clothing Erico stocked.

Every step through the mansion is strange. Quiet, like my body is uncertain if I'll get in trouble for being here. This isn't *my* home so every step feels dangerous almost.

I retrace the path Erico took me on yesterday, over the connected balcony and down the sweeping, wide staircase until I'm by the front door again, glancing through the mansion, searching for the kitchen.

Beyond me, by the back of the house, it opens into a huge sitting area with the floor-to-ceiling windows I can see from upstairs. Through them, the world. It taunts me because somewhere out there is my sister, my old life, the city I grew up in, all so far away. Montreal is where I was born, raised, went to school…lived with Mom.

Where I lost Mom. Now, not even in the same country, it feels like I'm further away than ever from her.

I never even got the chance to visit her gravesite.

Della gave me a picture of it, of course, but shortly after the accident, Stefano had me sent away. By the time Mom's final resting place was all set up, I was forgotten. Della begged Stefano for the medical centre to let me out on a day trip to visit, but the asshole refused.

Once moving in with Della and the Corsettis, we meant to. But between her wedding, Aurora's return, and the battle with Stefano, I never got the chance.

As I stare at the ocean outdoors, I wonder if I ever will.

Mom would love this place. She, like me, had an affinity for water.

Blinking away the sudden formation of tears, I look away from the doorway, from New York and the world beyond the glass, and toward the rest of the sitting area I've stumbled upon. Low, white couches, high back chairs by the fireplace stretch into one wall, glass tables, and the opposite wall, a huge fish tank.

That, I wander closer to. Bright, colourful, tropical fish swim around. A few of them, which I can't help but smile at. To have tropical fish requires specific equipment—pricey equipment. I know because as a child, Mom bought me a goldfish in place of me wanting a Blue Angelfish, since it was all she could afford.

I study each fish, taking in their bold colours when the familiar and desired yellow and blue catches my eye. What are the fucking chances he owns a Blue Angelfish, the very fish I always dreamed of having? Apparently, pretty good, since here one is.

"Morning, Mrs. Rossi."

I jump, but in more than just surprise at the voice suddenly appearing. Also, from that name. It's the first time someone's referred to me by my married name.

I don't like it. They should never use it again.

With a stiff back, I look away from the fish tank and to the stout woman Erico introduced to me yesterday. Carlotta, the housekeeper. She's smiling, obviously trying to ease the tension. It's not her fault I despise my new name, so I try to force my lips to move into responding. Instead, I think a grimace is the best I manage.

"You must be hungry. I'll show you to the kitchen, if you'd like. Make you some breakfast."

I nod because that's precisely where I was hoping to find. She turns with a small hand wave for me to follow, so I do, walking down a short, white hallway connecting the sitting area to a large kitchen, filled with shiny stainless-steel appliances.

"You like fish?" she asks suddenly, glancing over her shoulder.

I nod.

"Erico too. Even as a young boy, he was always bugging his parents to buy him some. When he was six, he even tried for a pet shark. That request was vetoed." She chuckles fondly and switches on the tap, washing her hands.

I hate that he and I have that in common. Not wanting a pet shark, but our appreciation of water creatures.

Carlotta continues sharing pleasant childhood memories of Erico, like this is supposed to make me feel something for the man. "As if he didn't get the hint, he then asked for a dolphin when he was ten."

I snort, once again, pushing pleasant thoughts of him away. His likes and dislikes shouldn't matter to me.

"You can sit." She nods to the high chairs pushed into the granite island.

I'm still hovering in the doorway, cautious to place myself in all this… this light. The kitchen is so white, it nearly reflects the massive dump of sunlight coming in from the half-wall of windows, including a door obviously leading to the back of the house.

While lovely, it makes me miss the Corsetti mansion. As much as the design of this place is prettier, the darkness and more traditional style of Nico's house meant it was easier to blend in with the shadows.

"Alternatively, the dining room is right through there, if you'd like to have your meal there instead." She gestures to a doorway opposite of me. Through it, I catch sight of a long table. Too formal.

I point to the counter, hoping she understands my meaning. *I'll eat here.*

She smiles and her dress makes a swishing noise as she heads for the very wide fridge behind her. "What would you like to eat? We have traditional breakfast foods—cereal, fruit, bagels, and the sort. I can also whip you up some homemade waffles."

Waffles. Things are already seeming a bit better by the prospect. I nod eagerly in agreement, causing her to laugh and head for another large cupboard, where she begins pulling out ingredients for batter.

"Got it. Waffles it is. Coming right up."

As she busies herself, I finally claim the chair closest to the door and watch her work. Looking from the kind housekeeper to the windows to my right, to the outdoors. Out there, I'd have an uninterrupted view of the body of water, and I make it my goal to go out there soon.

When I hear another set of footsteps come up behind me, I curve my back, hunch my shoulders and lower my head, aiming to hide from the newcomer.

Of course, the greeting of, "Mrs. Rossi," indicates I've failed.

The bodyguard from last night, Sebastian, steps up beside the counter, resting his hands lazily on the edge. His youthful charm is infectious, and I smile tightly to be polite.

"Good morning."

I manage a small wave in return.

"After you eat, I can take you around the mansion and grounds, if you'd like," he offers, to which I nod my agreement. If I'm not living my life

locked in a bedroom, it'd be smart to know my way around.

My phone vibrates at the same time Sebastian moves away, and based on his steps, he wanders back to the doorway. Maybe even out of the kitchen entirely, but I don't check. I pull out my phone, assuming it's Della—who I'm surprised *hasn't* messaged again yet—but my mood takes an even deeper plummet at the name flashing over my screen.

ERICO

Good morning, Ariella.

Scowling, I lay the phone to the side, screen down, and focus on Carlotta silently working. She's heating the waffle maker presently while rapidly stirring the batter. I focus on the noise of her task, but still, it doesn't block the phone's next buzz.

ERICO

Sleep well?

If I answer, maybe he'll stop bothering me. After all, he's taking the time out of his busy schedule to check on his new wife, but all I hear in my head is his declaration of how this marriage will go, and the last thing I want—need—is hope. To start clinging to a concept that'll never happen. There's little point in these niceties if his plan is to ignore me afterwards.

There's a lot I've dealt with and a lot I'm willing to take on, to put my head down and ignore. But the specific experience I *refuse* to live through is any emotional back and forth.

Not wanting me—fine. Typical. Used to it.

Acting like he cares to ignore me another time—even my own misery has that limitation.

ERICO

Hope the room was to your liking. Enjoy your day.

That sounds very final, and I close my phone, aiming to ignore it for good.

"Two more minutes," Carlotta suddenly murmurs, pulling a plate from the cupboard over her head. She digs out maple syrup, which I sincerely hope is the authentic Canadian stuff and not some cheap knockoff. Living with Nico and his family was when I *truly* experienced the best quality

maple syrup, rather than the low-cost stuff from my childhood. When Carlotta rests the bottle on the counter, I catch the label, and breathe, thankful for this place being stocked well.

Another vibration from my phone and a longer message fills the screen, irritation filling every word.

ERICO

Stop being childish and ignoring me. I know you're on your phone.

Only one way he would. I glance behind me, toward where Sebastian last was. I don't see him, but I'm sure he's watching me. As polite as he might be, he ultimately works for my husband, which means every little move I make can be reported back.

But Erico's message is yet another reminder. *This* is the true Erico. Maybe I am being childish, but what does he care? I almost message him that too before opting to flip over my cell and make my point very obvious through actions.

Carlotta slides a plate over with two homemade, fluffy waffles stacked on top of one another, a pile of whip cream, and a drizzle of maple syrup that makes everything instantly better. The pile is framed by sliced strawberries. When did I last eat? Yesterday morning? Under the watchful eyes of both Della and Aurora.

The moment I stick a fork into the pile, Carlotta says, "Enjoy, Mrs. Rossi. I have a few things to do but message if you need anything." She walks by me before I can comment on her using that moniker. People must stop doing that.

Eating becomes awkward then, as I sit in a kitchen I've never been to before ten minutes ago, in a house that's supposedly mine now. Not a house bought with my partner of choice. Rather, one I forced myself onto, who already declared where and how the household would run.

The food becomes stale in my throat, flavour dissipating for disappointment.

Fuck. The car accident did a lot to my brain apparently. Made me lose it entirely.

As I finish eating, steps return to the kitchen. They're louder than Carlotta's, telling me they're likely Sebastian. Sure enough, he stops by the counter, his hands coming to rest on top. I focus on those hands, inches

away from my own. My eyes travel the length of his arm, which is clothed in a leather jacket, and finally up to his handsome face. He has a boyish charm.

“Mrs. Rossi.” He tips his head. “Carlotta’s food is delicious, isn’t it?”

Without responding to that question, I bring my phone closer, swiping away the messaging app last open in favour of the notepad app I use so frequently now. Being mute isn’t without its challenges, and I’d do anything to *not* be. But every time I try to speak, I get choked up again. The final words I spoke to Mom arise in my head and clog my throat, making it impossible to speak through. Sometimes, I don’t bother even trying.

I used to write on whiteboards and notebooks in the medical centre, but once Nico got me out, he and Della bought me a cell, and it’s been more convenient to talk over text messages or through the notepad app.

> PLEASE STOP CALLING ME MRS. ROSSI. MY NAME IS ARIELLA.

His dark eyes study my screen before flicking toward me. “It is your name though. But if you insist, then Ariella is it.”

Thank you, I mouth and his attention falls right to my lips. My skin heats—I hadn’t meant to do that. But instead of interest, he seems curious. His head tips slightly to the side, his eyes narrowing on my mouth and then dropping to my hands.

“Do you know sign language?”

I do because the speech and language pathologist at the medical centre taught me. While the doctors and psychologists were focused on my trauma healing, mental health, and speaking again, other professions came in to give me alternate solutions. Learning American Sign Language was one of them, except then I realized how utterly useless it is when no one in my life knows it.

Besides, away from the medical centre, I slipped right into the background. The Corsettis have too much going on and I wouldn’t be a bother to ask them to learn a whole new language just for me. Even asking Della felt like I’d burden her. Besides, I got the sense, it’d reactivate her determination to “fix” me, and I’d rather not deal with that. So sign language became yet another skill I have but never use.

I nod, now curious why Sebastian is asking.

He pushes off the counter, lifting his hands into the air. Throwing a crooked smile, he murmurs, “Don’t make fun if I’m no good.” Then his hands move up to his forehead by his ear, and swoops out.

Hi.

In sign language.

My mouth gapes open. Sebastian knows sign language. Or at least enough to greet me.

His hand rests on his chest and he lightly taps it.

My.

His index and middle fingers on both hands come together, and he taps them against one another in an X sign, facing down.

Name.

And then he spells out every letter of his name with the correct corresponding sign. Mostly, correct anyway. Some rickety, some close enough I understand.

At the end of it, I only have one question, which I sign back to him. *How do you know sign language?*

He watches intently, his brows dipping, then chuckles, slightly nervous. “Sorry, understanding is more challenging for me. Could you do that again but slower?” When I do, he answers, “Oh, my seven-year-old nephew was born deaf, so a lot of my family took the time to learn it.”

That’s sweet. Slowly and so he can catch it, I sign, *Is that why you were chosen to guard me?*

He shakes his head. “Mr. Rossi isn’t aware of my nephew. No one here is. I don’t talk about them much. It was a happy coincidence, but I figured I’d let you know in case it’s easier, or better, for you if you’d like to sign instead. Can’t promise I won’t need your help sometimes, but it’s another option. Up to you, of course, Mrs. Ro—Ariella.”

Thank you, I reply with my hands.

Maybe, just maybe, it won’t be so terrible here.

Erico

Exhaustion keeps me passed out until late morning. Even then, by the time I get up right before noon, it doesn't feel like enough sleep. My eyes are still heavy, my body weighted. It was the most restless sleep I've had in a long time.

No matter, since I'm only in Vegas for a couple of days, I shouldn't be switching my sleep schedule up too much. When I reach for my phone, there's a few texts waiting, but the latest being from Sebastian gains all my attention.

SEBASTIAN

Started a tour of the mansion. It started raining into the afternoon so she didn't get to see the property or backyard yet. Tomorrow maybe. She wanted to go back to your room to rest.

Somehow, I don't believe she's simply resting, but the fact she's left the room at all, on only her first day of her new life, is enough. It speaks a little to her tenaciousness, which for some fucking reason, appeases me.

Instead of responding, I toss my phone to the side and get ready for the day. I dress quickly and head down to the car waiting for me.

Responding only answers the eagerness within me, rather than ignoring the feeling of needing to know about my wife. The facts I am aware of isn't

enough. I already feel, deep down, if it was Aurora in Ariella's place, the details her family would have provided me would have been sufficient. But what Nico passed along about Ariella isn't enough.

Which brings me to an email that was delivered while I was asleep. From the few men I've had running background checks on her. I want to know *everything*, right down to the hospital her mother birthed her inside.

As I'm driven to one of the *Famiglia* bars that's been chosen for the quarterly meeting, I read over the details they've so far found, my stomach clenching with the first fact. The anniversary of her mother's death is in a week. Fuck.

Instantly, I'm at a loss. If Ariella's upset that day—and rightly so—I won't know how to console her. Now that I think about it, I've *never* soothed someone about a death. Plus, she may not want my support, being that I'm practically a stranger to her. Worse, because by the time the anniversary comes around, I'll have only been back home with her for a matter of days, if that.

Fucking Christ.

I keep reading, the second line becoming just as intriguing as the first.

Her birthday is tomorrow. It'll make the eleven-year age gap between us ten, being that she'll turn twenty-two.

Fuck Corsetti for not letting me know this. Or perhaps, he wasn't aware either. Della certainly does though, which means she kept that information from her husband, in turn keeping it from me.

By the time I enter the empty bar, only a few of the *Famiglia* capos already arriving, I head for a booth in the back, signalling to the bartenders who're setting up for the day to bring me something strong. A few of the heads glance at me from their places around the room, one even standing as though to approach, but the glare I shoot every one of them keeps them away.

In truth, it's not their fault I'm annoyed, immediately feeling the tightness winding my form, frustration clamping my jaw shut.

I won't be home for her birthday. Distance aside, that's an asshole move on my part.

Can I fly home and back in time tomorrow? Would that even be wise to show up in New York, only for the afternoon and…do what? Take her out for a proper celebration? There's so little I know about Ariella, I'm not even sure *what* she'd enjoy doing.

The mantra of *fuck* continues to roll through my head as some idiotic soul takes the seat across from me. Clearly, the look I gave the room upon entering wasn't enough so I lift my eyes, scanning past the glass of alcohol that was delivered while I was lost in thought, and onto the man across from me.

My father's inquiring eyes drill right back, his mouth flat as his arms come to rest over the tabletop. He shouldn't be here until tomorrow for the leadership change, since he opted to skip the meeting.

"What a surprise." I tip my drink toward him in greeting but leave my tone unimpressed. He always taught me that one's tone has more of an impact than words. Instead of outwardly stating my displeasure, to make it known through *how* I say it and the behaviours that go along with it.

He reclines against the booth, sliding one arm along the back, which tells me he's calm. Unresponsive to my annoyance because whyever he's here, he feels he's in the right.

"Business in the area," is all he replies with as two fingers lift from the back of the booth's bench. It's a signal to the bar, and within a minute, the waitress is bringing over another glass of liquor for him. It's clear—his favourite gin. Everyone in his employ is aware of his preferred drink, so there's no fumbling over inquiring what he'd like.

Once the waitress is gone again, I shoot him another unimpressed stare, leaning back in the booth as well. "What business? I'd know about any business you're conducting here. The only reason you should be in Vegas is for the quarterly meeting later today, which you've already declined attending, and tomorrow."

Father's head dips to the side, a slow smirk spreading over his mouth, which he quickly hides with a sip from his glass. "Still not coming to the meeting, no. I have a different one."

My eyes narrow because he's being shifty right now. Sketchy actions imply sketchy results. "What meeting are you having that I'm not privy to? If it affects the *Famiglia*, I should be aware."

His lips press together in fake-thoughtfulness. Fake because Father never considers anything for as long as he's now pretending to. "You will. In time."

Before I can make my next argument, he stands from the booth and abandons his half-empty drink, and strides right out the front door. He

obviously, somehow, knew I was here and whatever game he just played was to let me know the dice has been rolled.

Not that I don't trust my father…but I don't completely trust him either. A paradox, yes, but that's been our entire relationship, especially in the past year or so. With more command being handed to me, he's changed from the man I knew growing up.

Did you ever really know him though?

I suppose not. A lot of my childhood was spent with Carlotta parenting me. Mother was always here or there—parties, spa days, shopping—while Father stayed away from the mansion more than he was there. If not travelling for work, he was passed out in his numerous offices or a condo apartment, preferring to sleep and live where the organization needed him most rather than be a parent.

So whatever Father's doing now, he believes it's for the best, but not informing me doesn't sit well either.

There was a single vow I made to myself growing up. That I might not be having a typical marriage with Ariella, but our children, my heirs, they *will* know me. I *will* drive the near three hours home each day and spend evenings with them, whether that's training, swimming, or visiting a park. They'll have what I never did—a father.

The fact I'm sitting in Vegas, almost three thousand miles away from my wife and all the ability to begin creating those children, is not lost on me.

My gaze is stuck on the door Father left out of, debating to follow him or not. I still have hours until the meeting begins, which would give me the time to trail him and see what he's up to. If only to settle the churning in my stomach and the instinct that something is majorly wrong.

Making my decision to follow, I swallow the final chug of my drink and abandon my glass, rebuttoning my suit's coat as I stand and head toward the door.

A body steps in front of me, and I'm about to curse whichever brainless staff dared block my way when their outfit registers. Certainly not waitstaff, nor one of the heads, who are all men. Instead, a striking white dress, way too tiny for casual day-to-day use anywhere outside of Sin City. It's made even more striking due to the bold waterfall of black hair, with fanned bangs framing her face. A deep red is painted on her lips, curling upwards

and pulling my attention to devious, deep blue eyes. In turn, she's also studying me.

Hands with fingernails long as they are sharp come up to rub my forearm. Every nerve demands I shove her away, but I know this woman. And it's her surname protecting her from me injuring her pretty little face, and what the consequences would be if I did.

But that doesn't stop the millions of other thoughts in my head. The realization that last name or not, she's my enemy. An enemy on *my* territory demands action. But then she'll throw one tantrum to her daddy and I'll be dealing with the fallout, which is why, for now, I clench my fists, reining myself in until I know what the fuck a Russian is doing on my property.

Vanessa Volkov.

"Mr. Rossi." A head tilt in greeting and the attempt at a soft tone, which doesn't work. I shoulder her hand away, but when she glances at the space I've subtly created, she only smirks and says, "You're even more handsome than the photos show." A strong Russian accent makes her voice a purring rumble, throaty, and almost annoying.

What does Ariella's voice sound like? Throaty, soft-spoken, cheery—so many options.

"Miss Volkov," I return the greeting, attempting to keep my mood in check until determining why the princess of the Bratva is *here* on American soil, in *my* club. If she's here, then her father, the Bratva's leader, Ursin Volkov, must be slinking around nearby. "What an unlikely surprise."

She laughs, throwing her head back, which seems entirely too fake and grates my nerves. "If you were to speak with your father, it's actually not so unlikely."

My eyes flash behind her, to the door Father left out of, and our entire conversation hits me. The meeting he avoided telling me about is *this*. Vanessa's presence is my secondary concern, next to the fact that the head of the Bratva is somewhere in my city, making deals with my father. A deal that could be positive for the *Famiglia*, given how powerful the Bratva is, but they're almost *too* powerful. They're an organization I'm pleased not to work with, because doing so only puts us closer to them, and nothing good can come from that. Sometimes the price of power is too great to pay.

Father, what the hell are you playing at?

She steps forward and runs a hand up my chest, pausing right over my heart. "Come now, Erico, don't ignore me."

Every word from her mouth flicks at my nerves until I grab her thin, breakable wrist between two fingers, and jerk her away. My fingers add an extra pinch, a warning, which based on how quickly her smirk slides away for surprise, works. At least she's smart enough to recognize when the game's up.

"Never refer to me by my first name. It's Mr. Rossi to you. Get out of my sight. Run back to your father."

When I move to step around her, she follows, blocking my path again, her early seduction swapped for pure focus. "*Mr.* Rossi, we have things to discuss while our fathers chat about the future."

The future. Of fucking course. Father was insistent for me to wed her versus Ariella. I thought after the conversation he and I had, the topic would be dropped—but clearly not. Which means, I need to find him and break whatever deals he believes he's making.

My arm sweeps out and I force her to the side, only barely remembering to not push her too roughly. "Get out of my way, Miss Volkov. If you've forgotten, I'm married."

She opens her mouth to argue, but a stream of men burst through the bar's entrance, saving me from her response. My capos from all over the country file in, nodding toward me. If they notice Vanessa and who she is from afar, no one comments as they head to the door by the entrance and walk downstairs to the basement, where it's set up for these large meetings.

I glance at my phone, noting the time, which explains why everyone's suddenly arriving. Fuck. I'm torn between finding my father with Vanessa's unwilling help, and doing my actual job.

The last person to enter heads toward me rather than the staircase. He's dressed in a rumpled suit, which knowing him, was probably yanked out of a laundry basket minutes ago. He shoves his dark bangs from his eyes, which narrow in on the woman at my side.

"Leave, Miss Volkov. You have five minutes."

And then I walk toward Caladin, meeting him halfway. His gaze remains over my shoulder, his finger coming up to point. "Is that…"

"Yes." I knock his hand down to his side and grab his shoulder, spinning him with me as my stride doesn't break. "Just walk. Don't speak to her. I'll explain later." By the basement's stairs, I glance back to see Vanessa heading toward the front door, an extra bob in her steps that make me roll

my eyes. But I ask my cousin, “Why are you here? Thought you wanted to sit out.”

“I did.” He sighs deeply, dramatically. “But your father showed up at my condo earlier this morning and dragged me with him. Said he’d be handing over leadership in the days coming, since all the heads are here. Which means,” he spreads his hands, “here I am with nothing better to do. Which, also, by the way, do you know how uncomfortable it is to sit with your father on a plane all afternoon? I’d rather have my balls cut off than do that again.”

I chuckle and shove my cousin down the darkened steps, only lit by a single light. He and Father always had a strange, tense relationship, regardless that Caladin has lived with us since he was ten. His own parents, my aunt and uncle, were both killed in a shooting gone wrong at one of the *Famiglia* businesses when he was a kid, so my parents took him in. We grew up together like brothers, one room away from each other, until he was eighteen and decided to move out. Mother paid him less attention then she paid me, and although Caladin trained with Father and me, there’s always been a disconnect between them.

We make it to the bottom of the stairs, where half the men are already sitting in a circle, waiting patiently for me to begin.

I straighten my suit jacket and walk for the head of the table, Caladin remaining behind me, even as I sit. Leaning against the wall by my shoulder, where he’ll be for the rest of our lives. It became obvious years ago, while he’d be right for the underboss position once I move up, he’s more my Consigliere than anything. I need his advice, his support, and he enjoys the freedom of the role.

Right before calling the meeting to a start, my phone lights up with a message.

SEBASTIAN

She won’t come out of her room. She’s been in there since this morning when the rain began. It’s nearly seven but she refuses to eat.

Ariella

Rain pounds heavy against the bedroom's windows. Furious, turbulent, and aligned to the exact beat of my heart. The sky is a dim, welcoming grey, exactly like my emotions. Outside is chilly, precisely like my internal temperature, no matter how tight of a ball I've curled myself into.

Other people despise the rain for bringing their mood down and ruining plans, but I love it. I love how the obscurity gives me a chance to hide. No one says, "Come outside, it's beautiful," when it's pouring, which means not having to invent an excuse.

From beneath the blanket, I observe the vicious rain mingling with the massive body of water surrounding the property. It's been pouring since this morning, and according to the weather app on my phone, it'll continue into the night and tomorrow, which means the tour Sebastian began will be postponed for a while.

It's probably for the best though. The tour I got of the mansion only made me sadder. I kept thinking about what Mom would tell me as a teenager.

Mom flicks hair off my forehead before pressing a kiss there. "I'm sorry, Ari. I know you wanted to go on the class trip."

"It's okay," I reply through a dry throat. It doesn't feel like it is, but I get it, so there's little point in showing Mom I'm upset when she's already

aware I am. “No biggie.”

Her smile informs me she sees right through my lie. “One day, I want the best for you, honey. I want you to grow up and make a good life for yourself. To live in a big, beautiful house and never struggle for money.”

If only she saw me now. I did it. I managed to get into a big, beautiful house—my third by now. But not in the ways she or I planned. *I* did nothing to earn the mansion.

That was hit number one on my mood this morning.

The second was the ocean I continued to watch through the wall of windows. Mom loved the ocean too. As a kid, she’d frequently take me and Della to the Lachine Canal—which isn’t the prettiest, by any means—but it was water. After walking Old Montreal because she adored the cobblestone roads, we’d sit on the grass by the Canal.

Della and I made her dreams a reality. We found better lives. The caveat being it took marriage and criminals to do it.

In a way, Mom made her dream come true as well. When she got with Stefano and we moved into his mansion, although it was half the size of this place and the Corsetti mansion, it was still larger than we’d ever seen before. Despite the hell and pain Stefano dragged everyone in my life into, I’m thankful for one reason: Mom smiled so much by his side.

It’s fucked up to despise and yet be grateful toward the man who killed her, but for a while, she loved him. It was enough for us all, even if I hated him from the second we were introduced.

“Della, Ariella, this is the man who’s been occupying so many of my evenings. Stefano, meet my girls.”

The man has a rat-like face that has me questioning Mom’s interest in him. His personality must be fantastic because when he smiles, it churns my stomach.

“Nice to meet you both.” He reaches a hand out for Della, and then me, and I return his shake, unable to look away from his toothy smile. Charming, in some ways, and Mom’s basically swooning by his side, but his gaze darkens, studying Della and me.

Almost like he’s judging us, but not in a mean way. More like, deciding if we’re suitable or not.

I don’t like the way my heart thumps faster, my senses picking up a disconcerting sensation, as he releases me and turns back to Mom.

But this place…this isn’t the dream she once wanted for me. This is a gilded cage. A place I willingly chose too—that’s the kicker.

Moving in with Della into the Corsetti mansion never felt permanent. Almost like, deep down, I *knew* it’d be temporary. It was a stepping stone in life. But as Sebastian showed me around the mansion, *this* feels like forever. There were different considerations as I took in everything, reminding myself that this is now home, even when it doesn’t feel like it.

I told him that too, through sign language. His response: “Yet. It’ll happen, I’m sure. After all, it is only your first day here.”

When the sky shifted into grey and the rain burst from the clouds, it was a sign. By then, I already felt the familiar—and this time, welcoming—darkness consume my mood. Like a switch, my positive emotions flicked off, taking all of me with it, until the only thing I desired was to hide.

The rain gave me that excuse since Sebastian was unable to show me outside. Hours later, I’m still buried beneath the blanket, breathing through the misery, the sudden low feeling—the depression I’ve been surviving with—managing—since I was fourteen. At sixteen, I was diagnosed. But only Mom knows, and my secret died with her. We never told Della because I asked Mom not to. As teenagers, I didn’t want her perception of me to change, and as adults, I’ve become a burden on her, so admitting what I spend so much time hiding feels wrong.

The doctor leaves the room so Mom and I can process the news together.

The diagnosis of clinical depression.

“It makes sense,” I conclude after a few minutes. “I feel like so much of me makes sense now.”

Mom approaches my chair and leans down to take me into a tight hug. Her hair, blonde like Della’s, fills my nose with her fruity scent. It’s comforting and grounding for my emotions.

“It changes nothing, honey. Nothing at all. You’re perfect, and I love you. We’ll talk with the doctors for any strategies they feel might help stabilize your mood, but only if you want. We came for answers, and if you’re happy just knowing, then you’re strong enough to manage this challenge.” She releases me to face me once more, her palm stroking hair away from the side of my face. “Ari, you’re strong. Knowing changes little. Now you better understand yourself. You don’t need to decide anything right now.”

My eyes burn from tears shed hours ago when the emotions mounted, growing so impossibly heavy. When my chest felt like it'd cave in. When breathing was a difficult task.

In the hours passing, Sebastian's come to my room twice, asking if I need anything, and Carlotta on rotation every hour, offering food. After the first four checks, I managed to text her to leave me alone, so she'd stop feeling obligated. Her reply was that she left a tray outside the door anyway. That was hours ago but I haven't gotten up for it.

Food seems so far away from what my body needs.

Throughout the day, Della's called twice and messaged a whole lot. Aurora too, and one from Nico. A missed call from Caterina, only a few minutes ago. I'm moments away from switching off my cell, even if every single message almost made me smile. They *care* enough to check on me. Della, I expected, but not the rest of them.

When you don't respond, they'll assume all is well and will stop caring. Then you'll be alone again.

True. But for now, I still can't answer. Can't pretend to be okay.

Nothing from Erico. I wonder if he's aware I've been in our room all day. I wonder if he cares. At what point will Erico discard a half-starved, depressed wife? It's easy to hide from Della, but to spend a lifetime with Erico doing so is something else. If he's gone often, it's doable.

When in this marriage farce will Erico realize he doesn't want someone with depression? The simple thought should be enough to force me from bed, but all it does is bury me deeper.

I don't *want* to be like this. But I don't know how to be what he'll need.

When my phone vibrates again, I slide it closer to me to see the screen. Guessing who's messaging has been a game of mine throughout the day.

Della.

But it's not her.

ERICO

Are you okay?

Like a fucking transport truck, his simple question slams right into my heart. A sick form of pleasure has me hugging my phone to my chest. He's asking. He knows. Probably from Sebastian's reports, but considering he's the same man who took off right away, he's still finding it in his undoubtedly busy day to check on me.

His is the first message I debate responding to but my screen is consumed by an incoming call.

His call.

Fuck.

I can't answer. Can't talk to this near-stranger, not with how I'm feeling.

Every ring has me more and more tempted to answer, so ending it sooner is better. I tap the hang-up button, ending his call, rather than letting it go to voicemail.

A text immediately follows.

ERICO

Why are you not answering me?

I stare at the phone until more bubbles pop up.

ERICO

Why won't you leave the room?

Because. I wish I had an ending to that. An exact purpose behind my *because*…but I don't.

ERICO

I swear to fuck, Ariella, answer me before I fly home and drag you from that room myself.

I shut my eyes. He doesn't get it—he probably never will either. But coming home, all for him to return to Vegas when he's hauled me from bed, isn't what I desire. I wish I knew what I *want.*

Love. Genuine love. What he's doing isn't from a place of care. It's obligation.

Rolling onto my back, I take the phone with me, fingers over the keypad, readying to respond before he makes good on his threat.

ME

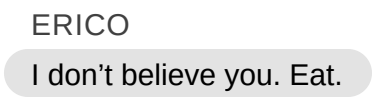
I'm fine. Just tired. New life and all that can be exhausting.

The text's status immediately switches, telling me he's read it, and with every passing second, my heart beats a bit faster for his response.

But he doesn't respond. After a while, I drop the phone to the bed and roll until I'm facing away from the windows—away from my phone. My

eyes shut and I feign sleep for myself, convincing my body to rest, even if it's much too early.

Just when it's about to work, my phone vibrates again, and I hate how fast I retrieve it.



Why, so I don't starve to death and you're left with nothing?

Tempting to message that to him, but I don't.

After abandoning my phone, I roll over again, and right before I shut my eyes for good, I remember exactly which day it is.

In a mere few hours, I'll be twenty-two.

Waking up the next morning, I hope to feel better.

I don't.

The gloom clings, even as I finally drag myself from bed and toward the bathroom. It's a win when I climb into the shower and wash up. A win when I dress in clean clothes.

In one way, I suppose I am doing better.

Must come with age. Wisdom and all that shit. Happy birthday to me.

But I'm not. I stare at the bed, feeling the most absolute longing to return to it. The rain continues, which means all I'll be doing today is occupying myself. My one and only hobby—music—can be done from right in this room. No point in sitting downstairs, where Sebastian and Carlotta are.

But if you go down, you'll be pretending to be human again.

Sometimes, my inner voice is too good to me. It's so correct.

When I return to the bed to retrieve my phone, there's a few messages already waiting. Many from Della wishing me a happy birthday, which I make a note to actually respond to later. To do what I've always done and pretend for her. She has enough to worry about without adding my mental health to her pile.

The next is from my husband. I wonder what time it is in Vegas, and what he's been doing all night. He's in a party city, two days after his

wedding. How much is he celebrating right now?

How many women has he fucked for our honeymoon?

That makes me grow cold, to the point when my finger taps his message, it's impossible not to feel a blatant anger about an accusation I have no proof of.

ERICO

Please eat today.

No promises, buddy. He's not ordering me from a place of care. More so his heir maker doesn't die before he could impregnate me.

I shut the app and tuck my phone in my back pocket as I wander from the bed and toward the massive window. I fell asleep with the curtains open so they're already drawn, and for a moment, I just zone out, watching the water and rain battle for control.

God, what I wouldn't do to be in there right now. To swim away from everything.

You did this, my voice reminds me.

I did. An act I'm regretting with every passing hour.

A knock on the door pulls my attention away, and for a moment, I go still, wondering if Erico did indeed come home, like he threatened to.

That would mean he cares. He doesn't care.

"Mrs. Rossi." *Sebastian.* "Ariella, if you'll come out, there's a surprise for you from Mr. Rossi. It was just delivered."

That has me walking toward the door. Not pleasure, but a curiosity driving me forward. When was the last time I was surprised? When Mom introduced her new boyfriend to Della and me. When Nico Corsetti visited me at the medical centre.

But when was the last time *I* was surprised? When someone surprised *me* with an item?

Never.

I think the answer is…never.

What could Erico possibly get me that's a surprise? A new fancy car—don't want one. More clothes—based on the closet, I have enough. Jewellery—I'm not even wearing my wedding ring, which is still in the room's corner from where I tossed it.

I open the door to find Sebastian raising his fist, presumably to knock again. Surprise flashes over his face and his arm jerks back to his side. "Oh,

Ariella, good. Just got off the phone with the boss. He sent you something. Come, I'll show you the way."

He walks down the hall without checking I'm following, but I do. Fuck Erico for using curiosity to tug away the black shade coating my form. Not entirely sure how I feel about that.

Sebastian leads me over the bridge and down to the main floor. He turns left toward the entranceway and the connected hallway we toured yesterday. We pass the small library, which is half the size of the Corsettis', and toward another room by the end of the hall, which is completely empty. Huge but empty. When asking about it, Sebastian shrugged. Called it an extra space that's sometimes used for parties and left it at that.

It's that door he opens.

The large room is still quite empty. White, painted walls, and a massive window, showing the side of the house and a bit of the ocean. If I was Erico, I'd make this room my office, so I could observe the water while working.

The difference from present to what I saw yesterday is the black piano tucked against the far side, facing the window.

Holy fuck.

I step into the room without another thought. The door shuts behind me and a quick glance finds Sebastian has left me alone to check out my surprise.

But how did Erico know? Is this Della's doing?

Composing music is one thing, but my love for the piano runs deep. As a child, I started composing and singing songs, and performed in talent shows throughout elementary school. Mom always praised me for my singing voice, and the older I got, the more other people did too. I never craved fame or to make a career from it, but it was a calming hobby. Made me feel joy. Writing a song, composing the tune with the piano, and singing the lyrics made the blackness fade into a pale grey. In high school, I often borrowed the music classroom but once graduating, I lost all access to pianos until Stefano came into our lives. He owned one I'd often use.

Post-accident, I stopped composing all together. The hobby reminded me too much of what I'd lost—Mom, my voice, my individuality. It was Yasmine, during her visits, that convinced me to get back to it. She saw my notebook one day and, with permission, began flipping through it. Having

someone read my private thoughts; the notebook acting as my journal for so long felt weird. There was no logical explanation for allowing her to read it.

In some ways, I'm pleased I did. She suggested I start by composing again, even if I wasn't comfortable enough singing yet, even to myself. I did, and continued to right until moving in with Della.

When my mood was light enough, I'd compose. I even wrote something to sing at her wedding, hoping *that* would be the thing to wake my voice up. Ignore everyone else and perform for her…but it didn't pan out that way.

I haven't written since the wedding.

No point. Even writing for myself is losing meaning as things continue to change around me.

But Erico purchased me the very tool meant to bring me back.

I wander toward it, tempted by the shiny, black coating, which I can't help but drag a finger over, feeling its smooth exterior. The brand name of Bösendorfer tells me he researched and found one of the best brands on the market.

I don't know what to think. Somehow he *knew*…The same man who blatantly stated we'd lead different lives, live in different homes, who ran off the moment he got his wedding ring on my finger, is the same person who learned something authentic about me. His gift could have very easily been thoughtless materialistic items, like jewels, rather than something he believed I'd sincerely enjoy.

He was correct.

This is a game, Ariella. He's trying to lure you in. Make you feel like you're content to be a domesticated housewife he can visit when he feels like it.

My inner voice might be correct…

But for now, I lift the lid to the ivory keys, pausing when I find an envelope with my name etched on it. I pick it up and slide out the letter, reading every word as my confusion deepens.

Ariella,

Happy birthday. I'm sorry for my absence, but I wanted you to have this in my stead.

Erico.

The letter falls onto the keys, my brain numbing, still unable to formulate a proper word for what he's doing.

Instead, I cry. Tears, the same I've been crying for nearly a day now, continue to slide down my face, but instead of sadness and despair, I'm *lost*. Not happy—can't be that. But not unhappy either. Lost. Confused.

Confounded with how to feel about this. It's like he's buying me…but he's buying me with such a lovely gift, I can't help but accept his purchasing of me.

Instead, I sit, slumped, staring at the piano, tears dripping down my cheeks.

So fucking confused as I stare at the piano, my fingers aching to touch it, to play music. To go retrieve my notebook and perform the songs already written. To revise old ones and make them better.

Why did he do this? Why does he taunt me with niceties?

My phone rings, the screen flashing with the FaceTime app.

Fuck. He's calling me. Do I ignore him? That'd be a bitch move, considering what he's done here. But my cheeks are warm from crying, and though I wipe them away, it'll be impossible to hide the red rimming my eyes. Ideally, he won't pay attention.

I tap the button to answer his call and Erico's face fills my screen. I prop my phone up on the piano keys and manage a small wave in greeting as I try to decipher the room he's in. Its bright, white walls. I think he's leaning against a headboard. A hotel room?

His greeting smile immediately shifts into a frown, his head tilting to the right. "Why are you crying?"

Damn it. I shrug, pressing my lips together to stop another wave of his fake caring.

His eyes narrow, obviously seeing through my lie, but thankfully, he switches topics. "Happy birthday, Ariella."

How did you know?

How did you know when my birthday is?

How did you know what hobbies I have?

Slowly so he can catch it, I mouth, *Thank you. How did you know?*

Erico smirks, giving me a look full of sin that heats my insides. "You have no faith if you think I wouldn't have had your background looked into. Of course, I know your birthday. As for your hobbies, I had my driver search your backpack yesterday before bringing it up. He saw the notebook

and sent me pictures of it to look over. The lyrics and the matching music notes you assigned to each one. All your scribbles as you changed and modified them. And the little messages you wrote yourself about how you'd perform these on a piano."

No apology for searching my personal items. I should be angry he's so invasively checking into my life—especially when he could simply *ask* me. *Talk* to me—but instead I merely smile, way too pleased and appreciative to be annoyed for long.

"Why didn't you tell me it was your birthday?" he asks, his tone colder than before. Almost like he's annoyed.

Because you wouldn't care. Because it doesn't matter. That was in my head though.

To respond to his question, I shrug, hoping my eyes convey my thoughts.

"We're married, Ariella," he reminds me, as if I could forget the entire reason I'm in the U.S.. "It means we tell each other facts about ourselves. Mine is two days before Halloween, by the way." He pauses, the angle of the phone changing with his movement. It puts some of his chest into view. He's in a white button-up shirt, the top two buttons undone. "I'll admit, I know nothing about pianos, but I was reassured that one is a top brand. If you want something else, I can make it happen."

My head shakes rapidly to deny his latest offer, and then I lift both hands with my thumbs up, enticing a deep chuckle from him that causes my own insides to flip in pleasure.

"Got it," he says lightly. "Glad you approve then." He pauses again, his amusement melting away for a serious expression once more. "One day, I hope you allow me to hear you play."

Allow. Such a simple word for a man who doesn't require me to give any permission.

Was I wrong about him?

"I've heard you haven't left your room for an entire day. Why?" he goes on.

Fucking Sebastian. I shrug.

His lips pinch. "There are consequences for lying to me."

Nico warned me of the consequences when he was still trying to convince me to change my mind about my offer. Said the *Famiglia* is a big deal; that they won't hesitate to remind a woman of her role. Which goes

against every bone, every fibre of my being, not to let another man dominate me.

Nothing, I mouth and shake my head slowly. Because what's wrong doesn't have words. Feeling alone in a life he's already stated would get more lonely means nothing is wrong. Not to him anyway.

Again, he seems like he doesn't believe me but instead moves on. "Fine. I didn't call to fight with you. I wanted to see you and nothing more. Wish you a happy birthday. Ensure you're okay since you're worrying Carlotta and Sebastian."

But not you.

"For now, I have to return to business and should be home in a couple more days."

I nod because his words leave no room for argument, but once again, I don't know what I want. The gift to lure me from my room isn't it, but the genuineness in this conversation might be. That he *wanted* to wish me a happy birthday. He didn't have to get me a gift at all. He certainly didn't have to call—no, video call—at that.

Okay, I mouth, but don't hang up.

Neither does he.

He watches me, his eyes bouncing around his screen. No doubt, questioning his sanity for agreeing to take me as his wife. A woman he literally bribed to get out of the bedroom.

The thought snaps like a rubber band in my head. My birthday provided him the means to get me out of bed. A bribe and a way to keep me silent for longer.

Maybe my beliefs are wildly incorrect. Maybe they're not. At this point, I can't tell what's reality and what's my mind going into its dark but welcoming crevices.

Either way, I wave goodbye because that's what he expects. I use my right hand to hide my ringless left one, thankful he hasn't noticed I'm not wearing it. Or he has, and he simply doesn't care. Somehow, that thought makes it worse.

He can return to his day and I'll hide behind my walls until I must emerge, pretend to be his wife, and then get to disappear again.

"Have a nice day, Ariella."

The screen goes black.

Grief hits me. I don't cry, but my body certainly wants to.

Not sure why at this point, but something about the abandonment right there on the technology shatters me. Breaks me. My mood both lifting and lowering. The depression becoming unreasonable, but my mind can't make sense of what's reasonable anymore.

I lower my phone to the bench beside me and clear the way for my fingers to stroke the keys again. I press down on the centre one, a low *ding* filling the empty room around me.

Tears fall again, no longer able to be kept at bay.

I cry because I'm sad about Mom.

I cry because I'm no longer with Della.

I cry because I've gotten a husband, like I dreamed of.

I cry because I shackled myself to a man who wants little to do with me.

Another finger presses down onto another key. And then another. Not making any music per se but causing sounds regardless. Sounds my ears have long missed.

Sounds that make me feel…dare I say it?

Happy.

Makes the tears slowly dry up, as my gaze locks on the phone by my side. If I understood my husband's intentions, it'd be better, but taking off to Vegas right away, gave me no chance to figure him out. He still remains the handsome man I ran into at Della's engagement party, and watched from across a dance floor at the wedding reception.

Every sound clears away the misery bit by bit. I'm not ungrateful, and I hope he doesn't think so.

Just confused.

Over his actions.

Over my emotions.

Over what in my brain decided *this* situation was best.

Erico

I toss the phone onto the bed and stand, quickly striding into the bathroom and away from that stupid piece of technology. It taunts me with availability and ability—being a method to contact my wife, even when I really shouldn't be bothering. It'll cause her to end up with unrealistic expectations of me. Of *us*.

But when I learned about her birthday, even I couldn't be that much of an ass. Some deep instinct knew she'd like a piano. After I was sent the pictures of her notebook, I poured over her lyrics. The pain in her chosen words. Being musically challenged and unable to understand the notes she was assigning to some of them, I can't even pretend to imagine what her songs would sound like, but a curiosity certainly struck me.

Then I was supposed to have it delivered, and Sebastian show it to her, and that was it. Never a phone call. Certainly not a video call when I realized a regular call requiring the use of voice wouldn't be enough.

But when her face filled my screen, every fight I've been having with myself vanished. Fuck, she's beautiful. There's misery in her eyes—deeply wedged—but it began fading over the course of our call.

I scowl at my cell phone as I finish readying for the day, and have to slide it into my pocket. Vegas never starts their days early, so it'll be hours until the city is bustling. Hell, it should have been hours more until I was up

too, considering, according to the time on my phone, I only went to bed four hours ago after the meeting ran late, and the afterparty ran later.

Father never appeared at the meeting, and through every casual conversation with a head, I was one more minute away from finding his ass and determining answers. But the party after the meeting is tradition. With all the heads together, they enjoy making it worth their time, and for all Caladin's bitching about being present, he continued to slide drinks my way, somehow understanding what I needed.

The alcohol never got me drunk though, when thoughts of my new wife home alone was sobering enough. I feel like an asshole—guilty even when the emotion has no place here. I shouldn't *be* guilty about following my own rules. About maintaining the necessary distance so I can continue leading the *Famiglia* without stress or concern of another person's feelings.

But the alcohol didn't stop my planning, or me scouring the pictures of her songs again. Or emailing my staff until someone got me the contact information for a music store in New York.

The look on her face made everything worth it.

And got her out of her room. Hopefully by now, she's eating too.

I exit the condo, placing all thoughts of Ariella into a box in the back of my head as I continue to focus on why I'm in Vegas at all. She can't distract me when I have stuff to deal with.

The meeting yesterday was productive, even if I was only half-listening. If it wasn't for Caladin's frequent jabs in my side, I might have zoned out completely. The *Famiglia* has had a lot of progress in recent months, which meant plenty of updates. A few distant relatives praised me for bridging the connection between us and the Corsetti family, while others grumbled. The consensus is split over abandoning a decades-old hatred of Lorenzo Corsetti or letting it go entirely and moving forward for the benefit of the organization. Either opinion, no one commented on my bride switch, which was wise of them.

Once in the elevator, I text Caladin, who's also staying in one of the condo apartments in this building, to meet me at the car in the underground parking lot. Knowing him, he'll be a few minutes as he drags his ass to get ready.

Sure enough, twenty minutes later, the elevator doors open and my rumpled cousin strides out and into the open back door of the town car.

He settles into the seat across from me, his mouth open in a wide yawn, his eyes still lined with sleep. “Do you not fuckin’ sleep anymore? I have a headache from hell.”

“Called a hangover. Next time, don’t get drunk.” I tap the car’s roof, signalling to the driver we’re ready to go.

“Whatever. Why’re we up so early?”

“You know every time my father or I are here, we prefer to stop into our Vegas locations directly, regardless if documentation is checking out. Since I’m up and it’s still before noon, which means half the city is still passed out, we can get a start on it.”

“Believe me,” his eyes narrow into slits, “I’m aware half the city is passed out still and I’m insanely fuckin’ jealous to not be one of them. But why do *we* have to get a start on it?”

“Because with me becoming Boss tonight and you also sliding into a new role, we need to ensure we’re a united front, even now. Consider this a prime opportunity to show people why you’ll be by my side.”

His arms cross over his chest as he slumps deeper into the seat. “Fine. But if you want any sort of conversation out of me, we need to make a coffee stop.”

Once Caladin’s slurping noisily on his coffee, we begin our trek to the nearest address I provided the driver earlier. He’s two sips in when somehow the drink of life begins its work and wakes him up.

“So. You end up finding the perfect gift for Ariella?”

I glance up from my own cup. “How did you know I was looking?”

He rolls his eyes. “All last night, it’s all you spoke about. Going back and forth between options. Kept talking about your guilt.”

Fuck. “Did I admit what I was guilty about?”

My asshole cousin drags out the suspense for longer by taking another sip of his drink, grinning around his cup because he fully knows what he’s doing. “’Bout leaving her so soon after the wedding,” he finally answers. “I mean, you *did* stay for a few hours, right? Consummate the marriage and all that.”

Any other family member would have gotten an immediate lie, but the guy who's like a brother to me, who's the only one to ever earn all my truths instead watches me shift in my seat as I admit, "No."

His mouth falls open. "Well, fuck, no wonder the guilt. I wouldn't be surprised if she threw that gift at you the moment you finally walk through the door. You realize, if anyone in the organization learned you didn't consummate, it'd reflect badly on you?"

I level my stare with him. "Quite aware, thanks, which means shut your mouth."

He shakes his head once, throwing an unimpressed look my way. "Just sayin', it's not what I expected from you."

"You know I don't have time to love a woman. It's not how I'm built. She'd take away from the *Famiglia*."

He rolls his eyes again. "Since when does sex equal love?"

"Besides," I skip over his last question, "she's not like that. I won't do that to her. Her background isn't…typical. She's not from this world, so I can safely assume a lot of the regular traditions will be put aside."

For a beat, Caladin only stares. He takes another sip and glances out the window, scanning the passing malls. "Now that's interesting," he finally murmurs, his eyes coming back to me, staring at me with a serious expression I see so infrequently from him. "Very interesting, cuz."

Way into the evening, close to midnight, everyone re-gathers at the meeting place, but instead of me at the head of the table, Father is.

Father, who strode in minutes ago without glancing my way. Fucker avoided me—and everyone else for that matter. Every call to him, or request for my men to be on the lookout, he's slid by us all until he was ready to be seen. Which means, I still didn't get to ask him about the Bratva's presence in Vegas.

For now, something more important is about to happen. Something bigger than him and me and our arguments over the organization's future.

The change of leadership. It's above him, me, and our visions. It's *for* the *Famiglia.*

“When Gia announced I’d be granted a son, I dreamed of this moment,” Father begins, scanning the room of gathered men. “For anyone with a son, you know what it’s like—the knowledge that he’ll be taking over for you. Following in your carefully laid footsteps and utilizing every minute of training you’ve put him through. There’s a pride in doing so, which I’ve witnessed multiple instances in my time as Boss, always envisioning the day I’d experience that pride too. When I made Erico my underboss, it was the beginning of that feeling.” He stands, this time looking toward me, where I’m on his right side. His eyes glisten, and for once, not with malice. He’s correct in that there was only ever a single time I’ve seen his current expression, and that’s was during my first promotion. “When he took over as underboss, it was only a matter of time before we came here. Once, I believed I’d remain your loyal Boss until the end of my days, serving right up until death claims me, but after recent months, I have complete confidence the future of the *Famiglia* is no longer with me, but with my son.”

He glances at me again, and I feel my chest expand with breath—with new life. *My* new life as it’s dangled inches from me. Minutes away from becoming a reality.

Then he scans the room, addressing everyone here. “Thank you all for coming to watch this momentous moment in our history. All our leadership under one roof to witness this makes me proud to have your trust. Your knowledge that handing over the *Famiglia* to my son is for the best. He’s a man I know will lead you all right, with a new bride by his side, and eventually an heir.”

His bitterness is buried beneath the pride he speaks of, but I catch a slight wind of it. His disapproving of Ariella blatantly stated for the room, if anyone here can figure out his tells.

Father turns his body, facing me now, his hands pressing together as though he was praying. I bow my head, my hand over my heart, waiting for his next words.

“Erico Rossi, underboss of the *Famiglia*, I now entrust the organization in your capable hands. From this day forward, you will be Boss. Do you agree to uphold the *Famiglia*, to ensure their prosperity, and to *always* place the organization before anything else?”

Those words, I’ve never heard before, but now my life makes sense. All Father’s done was place the organization before anything else, including

Mother. Me as well, to a point, because I was a part of his job. Training me for this moment, so the typical relationship a father and son might have, that was never us.

This is all I've ever prepared for. The reason I told Ariella her rough reality. I'm *not* a typical man. I'm a Made Man. One vow away from being Boss. The *Famiglia* already owned my life and loyalty, but now they own *me*. Everything I am will be for them.

And nothing will get in the way.

"I agree."

Father grins as I dip my head lower, the weight of my vow settling on my back as he waits for me to finish the ceremony with the final words that'll seal everything.

"Per la Famiglia." The Italian slogan flows from my lips as easily as the day I learned it.

The room breaks out in cheers, everyone repeating the slogan in a mutual chorus, but around Father and me, it feels like a silent bubble instead. Everything around us is muted, allowing me to hear his murmurs.

"Good job, son." His hand rests heavy on my shoulder, making a statement, even as he leans closer. "I'll expect you to remember that vow, Erico. Do not disappointment me. Continue making me proud, and not feeling like this will be the biggest error on my part." When he straightens, that pride from earlier is gone, replaced by an evil gleam in his eyes.

Our stare holds until Caladin whoops and jumps between us, his arm hooking around my neck as he steers me away and toward the staircase, where most of the other men have already gone, ready to celebrate the leadership change in the empty bar, which has been closed for the night for this purpose.

"Looked like you needed saving there," he mutters in my ear.

I'm swarmed by the others when we make it upstairs, people slapping me on my back, my shoulders, even my head, until they guarantee I'll wake up with both a headache and bruises.

Questions about who'll be my underboss arises, which I shrug off, because I truthfully don't know. Many assume it'll be Caladin, but I announce he'll be my Consigliere instead, based on his skillset and how we work together. It does present a problem for me, having to pick someone who I trust enough, but it'll be another day's concern.

Eventually, I make it back to Caladin, who's leaning against the bar, a beer bottle in his hand. He raises it up to greet me while also sliding a shot my way. The bar is littered with them, the two bartenders continuously pouring and lining them up for people to take.

"This mean I gotta respect you now and all that?" He smirks.

I shove my shoulder into his, jostling his half-empty beer. "Like you ever have before."

"I don't want the underboss job," he states, his tone flat and serious.

"I don't want you to have it. You know what I need of you. Besides, I'll pick whatever random family member I feel a decent relationship with, and it'll only be temporary until my own son is old enough to take the position."

A son…Always a fact, a requirement in my life, but for the first time ever, it hits me exactly why I need one. To be *this*. To do what I just did. To become an underboss and eventually, my new position.

Caladin's punch pulls me back to the present. He grins as he takes a chug from his bottle. "Just got thinking about children, didn't you? More reason to get home to your wife, no?" His brow lifts, challenging me to argue the fact.

Requiring an heir changes little right now. Ariella's so new to this world, to *me*, I don't want to shove motherhood at her yet. If she's hardly leaving her room after an entire day, what would another role do to her? It's not exactly a healthy option at the moment.

I shut my eyes, blocking out the fact I'm already breaking my own vows by placing her happiness before the *Famiglia*. If Father knew where my thoughts were, he'd be beating on me.

Sebastian messaged me once today and reported Ariella spent the majority of the day using her piano. I hate how pleased that made me.

As though thinking about him sent him some imaginary vibe, he texts again.

SEBASTIAN

She's in your room for the night. Also, congrats, Boss.

Clearly, the news already got spread to the organization-wide call out, informing all the soldiers of the change in leadership.

ME

Thanks.

I glance up from my phone to the rowdy crowd again, spotting my father right before he ascends a back staircase, leading to the offices above us. Pushing away from the bar, I barely throw a goodbye toward Caladin before I'm slipping through the crowd to follow.

I catch up right as he's taking a seat behind the desk, and based on his expression as he spots me in the doorway, he's unsurprised I followed. His hands fold over his stomach as he rocks back, leveling his stare with mine.

"You should be celebrating your promotion with the men. Consider yourself lucky I wish to retire because that role shouldn't be yours until I die. Especially with your recent decision-making."

His indirect insult rolls right off me as I step deeper into the office and slam the door shut to ensure no nosy fucker overhears. "Why'd you do it then? Why promote me if you felt I wasn't up to standards?"

"I have my own reasons," he replies in a non-answer. This is typical of Father though.

It doesn't matter when the demand for other facts are greater. "Are you really retiring when you're having secret meetings with Ursin Volkov?"

He grins but doesn't reply.

I head to the side of the desk, standing beside him rather than behind it, which forces him to spin to better see me. It's a power move, which we're both aware of. As of an hour ago, this desk became *mine* and standing on the other side places him at an advantage.

"Vanessa Volkov bombarding me here yesterday changes nothing, Father. I'm already married."

"I'm well aware of that, son," he says dryly. "Vanessa simply accompanied her father on his trip to Vegas and then wished to remain behind yesterday to congratulate you on your nuptials."

Except that conversation didn't happen at all. Bracing a fist on the desk and one on the back of his chair, I lean closer, towering over him. "Don't lie, Father. I've never even *seen* Vanessa until the photo you showed me the other day. Very doubtful she'd congratulate a couple she's never met. Tell me why you're having meetings with the Russian Bratva. You claim *I* make stupid decisions, but you're allowing them on American soil!"

My insult seemingly glides over his thinning hair, and I don't get a response. Even a flicker of emotion as his gaze remains steady and undisturbed as he replies, "I'm working on a business deal."

A deal with the Bratva is precarious and can end one of two ways. One of which, being our death. No one here would risk dealing with them because such a high-level agreement would come from the top. From me. Which means, I need to at least be aware of what hell my father's about to drag this organization through.

"What. Is. The. Deal?" Each word is punched, strained behind gritted teeth.

"You will see soon enough."

My fist tightens on the desk, seconds away from ending up in his face if he doesn't answer directly. "Perhaps you're right, Father. Maybe you stepped down much too early because in case you've forgotten the past hour, you gave up your rights to hide shit from me. *I'm* Boss now."

In a burst, he jumps to his feet, his palms shoving into my chest, creating a force of distance between us. "Son, first lesson to leadership: if you want to play the game, play it fucking right. You've been Boss for two-point-five seconds. Those men," he gestures to the door and the bar beyond, "are much more loyal to me than you. I have *years* on you, boy, so be fucking careful how you talk to me."

"The capos maybe, but not the soldiers." I cross my arms, lifting my chin as I stare down at my aging father. "And firepower is tougher than a bunch of old assholes arguing."

Father tips his head, almost like agreeing with me and then abruptly switches the topic. "How's your marriage?"

Even the thought of Ariella passing through my father's head makes me cold. "None of your business."

"You can't hide your mute bride away forever, you know. It's like your mother said. She has to meet everyone eventually."

"I know," I bite out. "I've had other focuses, in case you've forgotten."

We end up in a stand-off, and previous experiences with him already deem he won't let up until he believes he's won. So I walk away without glancing behind me.

"Go retire, Father, and if your insane plans with the Bratva involve double crossing me, you're fucking done. I'll prove exactly how effective all your training is."

Ariella

The piano changes a lot.

It clears the dim clouds that were devouring me and gives me something to do for the remainder of the day. At some point, I retrieved my notebook, despising how tainted it now felt, knowing Erico had read my private emotions, displayed through song. Even Della has never seen the book in its entirety.

But I spent the whole day testing out one of my original songs, trialling all the notes I theorized would work over the years. Carlotta eventually delivered food to my new music room, which I ate, and I made further plans with Sebastian to finish our tour tomorrow.

Even the dark, little voice managed to remain quieter than usual. Except, I know it's only a matter of time before something triggers it back.

I also finally respond to my sister's messages, telling her thanks and that I'd call her tomorrow.

By the time I retire to my new room, I feel *okay*. Okay as I can be, but that was Erico's plan after all. Drag me from this room with the temptation of something better.

I spend an extra long time in the shower, noting how it's even more grand than the one I had in the Corsetti mansion. The whole bathroom seems larger, the tile a shade of blue rather than plain white.

I've been comparing this place to Nico's house a lot today, and in every way, Erico's surpasses it.

I slide into the centre of the bed, noting how much space is around me. A king-sized mattress compared to my queen at Nico's, but there, I slept alone. The space beside my body taunts me. It knows here, I'll eventually be sharing this spot.

Not sure how I feel about it.

Vvvvvv.

My phone vibrates against the bedside table and I retrieve it, wondering who'd possibly be calling me this time of night.

Erico.

Through a video call again.

I could ignore it and claim I was already asleep if he asks. Or I could respond and what—talk?

What do I want?

I rest the phone down and lean away, but as fast as I avoid the device, I'm snatching it up again, tapping the answer button before the call dies and I lose this chance.

Erico fills my screen, and I catch his shoulders lowering. Relief that I picked up?

"Twice in one day," he murmurs. "I'd hoped you were still awake."

Why? I emphasize my lip movements with a head tilt so he catches the question.

"Because I wanted to see you."

A pleasurable shiver runs through me and my hand tightens on the blanket's edge, out of sight from the screen.

"You're in bed," he states.

I nod.

"Is it comfortable? To your liking?"

I nod again, unsure why he's asking these exact questions.

"I heard you played the piano most of the day today. This pleases me, Ariella."

I'd be annoyed at Sebastian doing his job again if it wasn't for Erico's final words. Something about the way his lips melded over the term *pleases* and my name makes my insides tighten in desire.

If only there's paper around because I want to use my own words rather than a head gesture to admit my true feelings about the gift. So I hold up my

finger, indicating to him to give me a moment, and switch to the messaging app.

ME

I really love it. Thank you. It was exactly what I needed today.

As soon as I send that, I swipe back to the call, watching in time as his eyes flick to the top of his screen, presumably reading my text which has just been delivered.

"It's my pleasure, Ariella. I hope you're able to find some of your old self with your new life here."

Because that's the girl he met. Not this depressed version of you.

Aw, damn, the voice is back. Fuck. Right when I thought I'd be in the clear for the night.

Smiling through the grim thought, I nod slowly, indicating I want that too. With the piano, it just might work.

"Well, I also wanted to call and let you know of some changes in my life. In *our* lives actually. I've been promoted to the *Famiglia* Boss."

My smile freezes, my eyes flicking over to the corner of the room as my brain digests his news. If he's Boss, I'm no longer an underboss's wife. I think—assume—the pressure of my role just grew. Became significant, as I'll be looked at to produce the next heir.

A well-known fact I was prepared for when I volunteered. Hell, I *want* to give him his heir because then I'll get to be a mother. But suddenly, it's not on our timeline. It's on whatever the organization demands of him because soon, they'll want the future locked in.

"Ariella?"

Right.

Congrats, I mouth through a tight smile.

"Thanks," he replies. "The heads of all my branches are probably still celebrating. Taking advantage of the free booze and all that, but I called it quits about an hour ago." He angles the phone until I can see the edge of the bed. "Long day. Tomorrow will be longer. I have a few more things to do in Vegas before I return." He pauses, rolling his lips together. "And Ariella, I *do* want to return to you soon."

So he can begin his heir-making program.

Despite my inner voice being probably correct, I push out a smile for him.

“Anyway, I wanted to let you know. And…” He looks away. “And to see you again, that’s all.”

My stomach knots, the hand around the blanket’s edge even tighter as we both fall silent, unsure of what to tell the other, while disturbed with his final words. For him, I’ll assume, because they’re not in line with his distancing plan, and for me, because I don’t know how to feel.

I don’t want to end up *hoping*.

So much of my life, I’ve hoped all to lose it. Hope for a good life, all for Mom to die. Hope for safety, all for our stepfather to wreck that. Hope for a happy ending, all to end up forcing myself upon a man who required a wife —whether that was me or another woman.

“Have a good sleep, Ariella,” Erico finally murmurs. “And happy birthday once again. I’ll be seeing you soon.”

The screen flashes black, leaving me uncertain if his latest statement was a threat or a promise.

Right after breakfast the next day, I head to the bedroom for absolute privacy when I call Della.

“Finally!” she answers on the first ring. “Fuck, can you *not* leave me in so much suspense? It’s been two days since I had to say goodbye to you, and while I know we’ve gone for longer without seeing or talking—” she’s referring to when Stefano had me locked away, “—it’s still weird, you know. Guess I’ve gotten used to you being around.”

For the first time in days, I use my voice. When no matter the fuckery of my mind, which prevents me from being normal, Della always manages to break through the trauma. The knowledge that *she’s* safe. Safer than anyone I know. Besides me, the only other living proof of our mother still on this earth.

“I missed you too, Della.”

“Nico’s been telling me not to stress, but that’s all I’ve been doing since you left. God, Ariella, to not have you here reminds me of when—”

“It’s fine,” I cut her off before she can mention our dead stepfather’s name. “I’m fine.”

“Are you?”

Not completely. “Today feels good.” *Walls back up.* The same way as I’ve hidden my true emotions for months away from her probing.

“Today,” she repeats, a deep skepticism lining her tone. “But not yesterday?”

I shrug, despite knowing she can’t see me. “Not really.”

“It’s hard not to have Mom here, right, on your birthday?” she incorrectly assumes.

“Yeah,” I agree regardless.

“Happy birthday—belated now, I guess. Twenty-two.”

“Thanks.”

Five seconds of silence pass before my sister groans. “Ari, elephant in the room much. Tell me what it’s been like in New York, with Erico. Reassure me so I don’t fly down there and kick his ass. *Please* tell me he did something for your birthday.”

Skipping past all her other questions, which require putting words to my emotions, I answer her last one. “He bought me a piano.”

“Fuck,” she breathes. “Seriously? That’s amazing. Guess he’s not so bad, after all, eh?”

“It’s fine,” I say immediately, utilizing my typical reassurance. *I’m fine* never means a person is fine. But then, knowing this is *Della*, my sister, who, despite my ongoing determination to hide every truth from her—to protect her in ways only a sister can, despite her being the eldest sibling—I stop lying. I *want* to admit this. To be reassured by another person on this level. Fuck, to seek guidance from her even. “I don’t know how he is, Della, because I don’t know him at all. When we arrived to his house in the Hamptons, he dropped me off and took off for a Vegas trip.”

“Fucker,” she curses. “Like, I get he has responsibilities in his role as an underboss, but that’s a dick move.” She pauses. “But, then also, he wasn’t supposed to get married until the end of the month so this probably threw off his plans a bit.”

She’s reminding me of everything I’m not and how I’m not wanted. I disturbed his plans when the wedding happened three weeks earlier than he planned for.

Della’s always more logical than me. In some ways, she’s also more emotional, so despite her logical statement, if I know her, she’ll follow up with some cursing—

“But then, he could have cancelled his stuff,” she rambles on. “A man who cares would have.”

That’s the thing. Erico doesn’t care.

“Or fuck, kept the original wedding date and solved all of this. Then you’d still be here for a few more weeks and he could have gone gallivanting in Vegas all he likes.”

“Della,” I whisper, aiming to break her tirade before she says more shit I won’t like. “Stop. It doesn’t matter anyway.”

She’s silent, her anger radiating through the phone, indicating her disagreement. “Fine.” I can picture her sulking. “When’s he coming back?”

“Dunno. Last night, he mentioned it’d be soon.”

“Last night?”

“Yeah…” Suddenly, I don’t want to admit this next part. Like it almost feels too personal to share. But I do. “He called me, to inform me be was promoted to Boss. And then yesterday morning, he called to wish me a happy birthday.”

“That’s…nice. Still not liking this whole set-up, though.”

“Too late now.” And that’s not even telling her he plans on living apart from me.

“Yeah, well…ugh! Why’d you volunteer again?”

So I can feel less alone. So I can make a family for myself, only to realize I’m an unwanted task he’s only treating well, the same one would feed a pet.

My entire mood shifts and the urgency to get off the phone builds. Especially since Sebastian offered to finish the tour today and it’s bright, sunny, and hot out, I don’t want my mood to drive me to bury my head in the pillows again and not leave this room.

“Someone’s at my door, Della,” I lie, “Gotta go.” Before she says goodbye, I jab the red hang-up button, dropping the device and striding away from it.

Della gets to live her perfect life with a husband who adores her. Who wants to spend his entire life making her wishes come true. With Nico, she’ll always have a voice.

With Erico, I never will.

The irony isn’t lost on me.

Before my mood shifts anymore, I exit the bedroom without retrieving my phone, heading right for the kitchen, which is where Sebastian said he’d

meet with me after my call with Della.

He glances up from his cup as I enter, his light eyes growing even brighter. He's like a hyper puppy and his grin is infectious, making mine too impossible to hide. "Good chat with your sister?"

Testing him, since he enjoys the practice, I sign to him, *Yes, thank you for waiting. Ready if you are.*

Since I moved slow enough, he seems to catch most of it, nodding as my hands return to my side. "If you asked if I'm ready, it's a yes. If you asked anything else, well, it's still a yes and I hope I won't get in trouble for agreeing to it."

My responding laughter is more of a huff as he gestures toward the back door for me to take the lead. I'm excited as I open it and step onto a stone path. One of those paths where the round stones are imbedded overtop the grass and not in a straight line, making the walk odder than it needs to be.

But it's not the path that has my attention *at all*. It's the Olympic-sized pool it leads to.

Oh my god. My steps quicken, flip-flops struggling to keep pace as I rush down the path for a better look at the massive pool, easily taking up a third of the space behind the house. The water is clear, a light turquoise as it reflects the sky above. It's surrounded by a cement border, wide enough for the dozen or so lounge chairs scattered around, each one with a small table between them.

If the pool wasn't enough, it's the view. Since the Rossi property sits on the edge of the land, only a few feet away from the cement is the clear fence, ensuring that people don't accidentally end up falling off the cliff and into the ocean.

But me, I walk right up to that fence, pressing into the glass, secretly hoping my weight will break it. Anything to get me closer to the vast ocean filling every inch of my sight. With the day's heat, lack of breeze, and bright sun, the water is calm. Only a few ripples over the smooth surface as I stare out into it.

Sebastian comes up beside me, resting his forearms on the railing. My attention actually moves from the water to him, to his rolled-up sleeves of his black shirt, studying the red poppy tattoo etched on his arm. I want to ask about it.

"Beautiful view, right?"

I nod, attention returning to it, and then to the pool behind us. I can definitely imagine swimming here all day, staring at the ocean around it. Studying water while in water sounds pretty damn fantastic. Then to go inside, eat whatever delicious meal Carlotta whips up, and spend the evening with the piano. Yeah. Until Erico remembers he has a wife back home, I can pretend to be living a fantastic life. If anything, I won't be pretending one day. When my idiotic brain realizes the love I was chasing will never happen, I'll have all this empty happiness to occupy me.

At least my cage is pretty.

I push away from the fence and head for the poolside, kicking off one flip-flop once I reach the cement. Testing the water, I dip my toe in, the silkiness of bliss coating my foot until I can't help but moan.

Fuck, I've missed swimming.

Swimming and music. Both activities that Erico's returned to me.

I turn to find Sebastian where I've left him and lift my hands into a signing motion. *Going to get changed.* And then I take off, into the house, without checking to ensure he understood me. He'll figure it out.

Erico

Caladin's sprawled on the couch in my condo, mindlessly flicking at the back of the leather. "You're fucking serious? What is your father *doing*? He's gonna get us all killed."

"I know, I know." My hands rub my face. For the majority of the day, I've been trying to have my father tracked, to see where precisely he's hiding our Bratva friends. "I'd like to go home. Business is done here. But it feels unfinished when I know that…that *eel* is slithering in my city."

He barks out a laughter. "Eel. Seriously? That's the best you can come up with." He shakes his head a few times, but returns to the serious version of him I need. "It's fucked when I can't find them in the same damn city."

It is. Caladin's the best tracker in the *Famiglia*. If someone needs to be found, I ask him. He'll always retrieve them. He's been holed up in one of the back offices of a casino here, scouring the city's footage when we pulled it from all the major roads.

"Unless the Volkovs already left," Caladin suggests. "We could very well be searching for literally nothing."

"Maybe. But that doesn't answer where my father's hiding. He hasn't taken the jet back home, which means he's still in the city. If he's here, I bet they are too."

“Why’s your father such an ass? He really sucks at taking no for an answer. I mean, throwing Vanessa at you…”

Caladin always speaks direct, and more often than not, I’m thankful for it. I lift the glass in my left hand in a toast, silently agreeing with him before I down it in one go and stand. I begin toward the bar, but instead, rest the glass on the nearest flat surface and head for the door. Something about the way the sun shone right against the wood paneling of the bar flashed another image through my mind. An image of another room, much grander than this one.

Caladin scrambles to get to his feet, rushing after me. “Where to now, Boss?”

I throw a look over my shoulder right as I exit the condo and hit the button for the elevator. “Must you call me that?”

He shrugs one shoulder. “It *is* your position now.”

“Doesn’t feel like it,” I grumble as the elevator shows up. “Not when my fucking father is still trying to maintain control of shit.”

As the elevator descends, Caladin realizes he still has no idea my plans. “Where we going?”

“Palms Casino. Just remembered, we own the Empathy Suite.” The place costs one hundred thousand dollars per night. Easy money maker for rich motherfuckers who have nothing better to spend their wealth on.

“And?”

“And, whatever my father is up to, he’s trying to make nice with the Bratva. Which means putting them up at the most elite place we have access to.”

The best thing about being me is that staff always hands over information without hesitation. The moment we entered the Palms Casino lobby, the pale faces of the reception staff told me all I needed to know. And then one, unsuspecting soul revealed the rest the moment Caladin and me approached.

“Sir, you’ve just missed your father.”

I throw a *aha* expression to my right, where Caladin’s leaning against the counter, rolling his eyes at me. “Was he with people?”

“A large man and a woman. Young. Long black hair.”

“Ursin and Vanessa,” I summarize to my cousin before demanding, “They say anything before they went?”

The boy nods rapidly, until his long bangs cover his face. “Your father said they’re checking out. He’s finished with your room.” He shifts, glancing to the computer in front of him and back. “Um, were you also looking to use it? A cleaning crew can get up there immediately.”

“Don’t bother.” I shove away from the desk and spin on my heel, tipping my head for Caladin to follow. “At least, I was right. I’ll call the Vegas airport. The Volkovs either arrived by their plane, or they took commercial, so I wouldn’t know they were in the city.” If Father gave their flight team approval to land on Rossi territory by his jet, he risked me learning about their presence before he was ready for me to.

I’m barely past the hotel lobby when my phone rings, the Rossi pilot’s name flashing over the screen. *This can’t be fucking good…*

“Erico here.”

“Sir, I just saw your father.”

I was fucking right. I dive toward the corner of the lobby, lowering my phone but upping the volume so Caladin can hear too. But leave it off speakerphone, so the pilot’s voice doesn’t travel too far.

“Where?”

“Airfield. I thought he was going to ask me to return him to New York but minutes after he arrived, another plane showed up. Plain black. He and two others boarded it and flew off.”

“Young woman, older man?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.” I hang up and tuck the phone away, staring at my cousin until something makes sense in all this. “He’s gone, and that plane better be taking the three of them to Russia and not New York. Fuck, Cal.”

He taps my shoulder. “Look, now you know where they’ve gone. They’re no longer in Vegas, but you know who still is? You. Man, you need to go home to your wife before she thinks you completely despise her.” With a gentle shove, he angles me toward the hotel’s doors. “Let’s go back to New York and keep an eye out for your father. I’ll get men on it, ensuring a black plane makes no appearance anywhere in the state.”

“Thanks.” Because my cousin’s right. As much as a part of me wants to remain in Vegas and avoid Ariella, I can’t. With the meeting and leadership

exchange done, and Father and his Bratva drama also presently flying away, there's no reason to be here. "If he's headed to Russia, then I want to know why."

"Easy way to figure it out. Call your mother in a day or so. Ask her if he's around."

I scowl. "But that means speaking to her."

Once boarded on the plane an hour later, I text Ariella informing her I'm on my way.

After a few minutes, no answer.

I then call, minutes before takeoff, while I still can.

No answer.

"The fuck."

"Say that louder," Caladin chimes, extra annoyingly. "Didn't hear you well enough."

"Not talking to you."

"Right." He grins, kicking one leg over the other. "Because you're trying to call your wife. Oh, how the tides have changed."

"It's not like that," I deny. It's not. But after talking with her twice yesterday, and mentioning last night that I'd be home soon, I simply wish to inform her that *soon* is now.

But still no answer…

I bring up another conversation.

ME

Is Ariella around her phone?

Sebastian always responds right away, but after a full tense two minutes, when he still doesn't, a cold hand grasps my dead heart.

"Fuck."

"What is it?"

"Sebastian's not answering. Neither is Ariella. Something's wrong."

"*Or* she just got tired of waiting for her honeymoon and found someone who'll give it to her. Literally. Sebastian's young, man. No doubt, they've been fawning over one another."

The glare I shoot my cousin promises death. Neither would do that, aware of the consequences. Especially Sebastian, since I'd have complete right to order his death. To exact it myself.

Right as a tenseness like I've never felt clenches around my nerves, the pilot pokes his head from the cockpit. "All ready to go, sir, if you are?"

"Yes," I manage through a tight throat, ignoring Caladin's smirk. "Please. Go. Let's return to New York."

Where I'll get to figure out the exact reason my wife is fucking ignoring me.

And then I'll show her all the reasons she's never to pull this shit again.

Ariella

Once I return to the pool, the misery I felt during my conversation with Della is completely gone. Gone and swept away by the water. Apparently, I'm a simple being with simple needs if a single inground, outdoor pool changed my day's outlook.

The early afternoon sun beats down on the pool, meaning I've chosen the hottest time of the day to be out here, but all bets were off when Sebastian showed me literal paradise.

Thinking about my bodyguard draws my attention to the fact he's no longer out here. I pause by the cement's edge, taking a quick sweep of the pool area, along with the massive grassy stretch of land to the side, not spotting him anywhere.

Oh well.

I steal the lounge chair closest to the pool's edge and kick my flipflops off. Without testing the water again, I plunge in, taking an immediate dive, my body slicing neatly through the water, wetting every single part of me like some awakening bath. It's there, I sigh, more content since the second I hugged Della goodbye and followed Erico out to his car.

The water's warm from the sun. If it was chilly, I likely wouldn't care anyway. Dipping my head, I bask in the chlorine-filled water, my long hair becoming weightless beneath the surface.

Even after years of not swimming, instincts return, keeping me buoyant as I first complete a circle of the massive pool, and then end up on my back, eyes shut against the sun's gleam.

As I bob, sound of steps approach, so I spin until I'm facing the opposite way and angle my head back, blocking the sun with a hand. Sebastian returns with a towel in one hand and a water bottle in the other.

From my back, I swim toward him, only realizing the closer I get, how much of me is on display. Parts of my body even Erico hasn't seen. The triangle top and string bottoms doesn't hide much, but it was the only swimsuit I found in that massive closet. The plain black is exactly what I would have personally chosen for myself, and I wonder if it was Erico himself who chose it or one of his staff.

Sebastian drops the towel onto the chair by my shoes, and then the water bottle, after holding it up to me. "Stay hydrated."

Then he lowers to the lounge chair beside mine, one leg on either side, his elbows resting on his knees to keep him upright. The heat is much too cruel for the rolled-up black shirt and cargo pants he's wearing but somehow, he makes it work. When he was inside, he must have gotten his sunglasses because he lowers them from his head to his eyes, giving him such a dangerous guise to his appearance, I physically feel it in my core.

I finish my swim on my stomach, hiding my chest beneath the water until I get closer to the edge and lift my hands from the pool. *Thanks,* I sign to him.

He replies, "No problem."

Closer, I catch how his skin is reddening from the heat already. Considering how he's dressed, I wouldn't mind company in the pool. I wonder if he's allowed to. After all, how much is Erico allowed to complain when he basically forced this guy to hang out with me? We may as well both take advantage of it.

Can you come in and swim with me? I sign, but based on the lowering of his brows, it was much too fast. I repeat, slower this time, but he only shakes his head, his expression pinching in embarrassment.

"Still didn't catch that, sorry."

This time, I go very simple and point to him and then the water. Twice until he understands.

"Can I swim with you?" When I nod, he adds, "I can't, no. But it's okay, Ariella. If it's company you're looking for, I'll be here." He gestures to the

chair he’s on.

After witnessing the drama between Aurora and her once-personal bodyguard, I guess I get why he needs to maintain the distance.

I complete another pass of the pool before returning to the edge closest to him. I go for water, but then end up in a one-sided conversation about his nephew, in which my signed responses become more and more complicated, simply to challenge him.

For easily an hour, we talk back and forth. Me, signing, and Sebastian switching between vocals and hand gestures, depending the length of his sentences. I’ve alternated between the water and sitting on the pool’s edge to give my body a break from the chlorine.

After I asked about his nephew, he asks me about my own family, even if there’s not much to say. He tells me about his induction and training into the *Famiglia* and how his father was a guard, his grandfather, and so on. His family has a long history with Erico’s, but nonetheless, he’s enjoying his life now. He asks me about my music and the piano, and once again, I keep those details to a minimum. I don’t invite him to listen, even though the thought crosses my mind because not only does that disrupt the tentative non-friendship boundary between us, I’m reminded of what Erico said to me.

“One day, I hope to hear you play.”

Dare I think it, Sebastian’s gaze remains unwavering. Even through his sunglasses, I feel him watching me every time I take a lap around the pool, and I’m not sure how to feel about it. Sebastian’s cute in a puppy dog way, and I love being able to speak with him in a less awkward method than texting or writing notes, and his easy friendship is an added bonus.

After another dip around the pool, Sebastian offers to retrieve food, and I nearly agree if it wasn’t for the abrupt shade that powers its way around the side of the house and toward us. The shade isn’t from clouds that suddenly turn grey, or my mood becoming depressed.

Erico’s large steps brings him around the mansion to the poolside, where he’s staring us both down. Sebastian scrambles to stand, leaving the relaxed state he’s slowly found himself in over the passing hours. I,

meanwhile, slip right beneath the water and tread a few feet away from the edge, keeping one uncertain eye on my husband as fury rolls off him in thick, pointless waves.

Whatever he's about to say to me, it better be with kindness only.

At the pool's edge, he's staring down at me. Bearing, is more like it. His eyes unblinking, his mouth flat, jaw tight until, after a long minute, he *does* blink. Then his gaze slides to the left toward Sebastian and he jerks his head. "Leave us."

Sebastian quickly steps around the lounge chairs, but before he's gone entirely, I lift my hand, palm toward him, fold my fingers down, and then lift them open again in the sign language representation for *goodbye*. Sebastian nods, telling me he understood. Just because Erico's decided to be a dick doesn't mean he can't get a proper acknowledgment.

Our exchange doesn't go unnoticed as Erico's breaths come out in stinted pants, sharp gaze flicking between me and Sebastian's retreating back, like he's determining which fight to have first.

With a sugary smile, I swim away, floating on my back and creating enough distance between us so when he yells, it can be from afar. So what if I've been friendly with Sebastian? It's better than hiding in the bedroom all day, right. Besides, Erico already said he might be gone often, especially now as Boss, so being on good terms with the staff, who'll be around me constantly, is smart.

By the time I complete a circle around the pool, Erico has removed his suit jacket, his shoes and socks, his Rolex, and his phone, placing them all on the seat Sebastian last occupied, almost like trying to make a claim on it too.

Then he walks to the edge of the pool, right by the stone steps.

And down them, ankles in the water.

And another step, continuing until the water's up to his hip, and then his chest.

He's insane.

Quick, powerful strides take him to my side, and even paddling can't get me away fast enough. One second he was by the pool's edge and the next, I'm being pinned to the wall, his arms framing my body, keeping me captive.

His wet clothing clings to his form, his white button-down shirt making the planes of his chest more prominent. Beneath the shirt, made transparent

by the water, I spot a few dark tattoos. Water droplets cling to his face from his quick shark-like swim to my side, and he's barely panting, telling me he's also spent a lot of time in this pool and is a proficient swimmer, considering he did this all with clothing that got weighed down by water.

"What are you doing?" he bites out, his wet lips brushing against one another in a way my insides appreciate all too much. Even as my mind is still catching up to the fact that Erico has returned without warning from Vegas.

My eyes flick around the pool, my answer obvious.

"Sebastian never informed me you were out here."

Wow, there's making sure I'm not hiding in a room and then there's this.

"In fact, he never answered the text I sent him. Neither did you." He sent me a message? Must have done so before I abandoned my phone on the bed. "But now, I see why I was ignored by the two people who shouldn't be."

Do you? My brow lifts a fraction in question.

One of his arms leaves the wall at my side and a single finger drags over my neck. Other than the kiss sealing our vows, this is the one and only time he's touched me and I hate how good it feels. Hate the way my desperate body aches to cling to the sensation, to ensure it continues. He patches something inside me, though. Something that was lonely before thirty seconds ago. But then also *causes* that same loneliness because my mind and body know, this is fleeting. It'll always be momentary with him. Everything will have a role—a purpose behind it. He'll touch me to impregnant me. He'll touch me in public when he has to show a partnership. But that's it.

Even if the look in his dark eyes claims something else.

His finger slides down my neck, chasing water droplets dripping from my hair and onto my chest. His touch pauses right at the edge of the bikini top, and I curse my breathing for stopping. For the falter in my heart that I have little doubt he feels.

"Because when you dress like this, how can he resist looking?" He fingers the string around my neck. "Of all the fucking swimsuits stocked in your closet, you choose this one?"

There's more? I put on the first one I found. Definitely would have worn a more modest one had I saw the others.

“I rushed back from Vegas to see you. The video chats got tiresome when seeing the real version of you was a possibility. The one I can touch.” His thumb slides over the curve of my breast, his eyes pinning me to the spot. “*Sirena,*” he murmurs, and I don’t need to understand Italian to comprehend what he’s calling me. “*La mia sirena mortale.* My deadly siren, luring out the killer inside me if other men continue to gaze at your body how Sebastian was checking you out.”

Well, you don’t want it. If I could talk, that’s precisely what I would say. I try to tell him that too. For my wet lips to part and to speak the words, but metal on metal fills my ears instead, a scream accompanying it, and I remain silent. Again. For my safety.

His other hand slips into the water so I’m no longer caged in. But I am now, in other ways. By the way his hand splays across my hip, fingers wrapping around me. His other traces the edge of my bikini, not touching, just tempting. So opposite of the man I knew days ago.

Do you know him at all though?

“You seem to forget, Ariella, you’re *my* wife. Just because I go out of town, doesn’t mean others get to move into my place.”

So that’s what this is. A damn power trip. Erico felt his little caged pet was seeking comfort elsewhere and can’t handle the challenge.

I fucking hate the insinuation though, and shove my hands into his chest while pushing off the wall, trying to use my strength to dive through the water and escape. If I succeed, my death look tells him as much too.

But I don’t because he doesn’t budge. My strength nothing to his own. The hand enticing ungodly feelings over my chest slides upwards to the column of my throat. He doesn’t linger for long, his thumb and forefinger gripping the side of my jaw as he angles my face to wherever he wants me.

Another show. Proof that I’m merely his doll, his plaything. The wife he’ll keep by his side that no one else can touch.

Yet, I can’t move, and not because of his physical hold, but rather the hold he has on my emotions. The confusion I’m feeling toward his own anger and annoyance, while feeling also an appreciation I *should* despise.

“You’re very difficult for me to figure out, *quello silenzioso*. It’s maddening. Your eyes say you hate me, but your body claims otherwise. Which tells me, it may not be hate you feel but a need for protection. Feeling like you should be protecting yourself from me?”

I roll my eyes, saying *Are you serious?* in the only method I can at the moment.

“If I explored your body, I could prove it to you.”

Beneath his hold, I manage to lift my chin a fraction. Not sure if I’m daring to call his bluff or for him to release me. Either option wouldn’t be what I crave though. Whatever’s in his head isn’t pleasant, it’s control. And that’s not what I want our marriage to be.

“Do you want me to explore?”

Yes. I shake my head in denial because it won’t mean anything.

“Very well then. You’re in charge, Ariella.”

Am I? Somehow, that isn’t the sense I’ve been getting from him. Not every time we’ve been in the same room, and especially not how my conversation with Nico suggested he’d be. Nico made it sound like if, on my wedding night, I didn’t lie on my back and spread my legs willingly, Erico could force me. Nico claimed the *Famiglia’s* morals are different. Rape doesn’t exist between a couple, and it was a fact he shared with absolute bitterness and apology. I accepted it and told myself Erico was kind when I met him, and I’d cling to that memory on our wedding night.

Of course, nothing of this marriage has gone how I expected it to.

Erico releases my hip and neck simultaneously and instead cups my face, holding me almost tenderly. “Happy birthday, Ariella, for real this time. Telling you over video chat or in a note accompanying the piano isn’t the real thing. I’m pleased to hear about all your piano usage.”

Fuck, what’s he doing? Luring me in with kindness only to shove me away in my corner again.

It’s perfect, I mouth, giving him my honesty. At least, we can be amicable, right?

His eyes flick to my mouth and even though moments ago, he said it’s in my control, I wonder if he’ll kiss me. I wonder if I *want* him to kiss me. A replay of our wedding kiss under the guise of this marriage.

I don’t want him to.

I’m unsure what I desire.

I don’t want him to kiss me because his hot and cold personality is annoying. He talks of separate lives, but he comes storming in here when it’s convenient for him.

I turn my head away, my hair creating a wall between us, and in the last second before my eyes flicker shut, I spot his disappointment.

“You know sign language.” Not a question but a fact spoken with bitterness.

I nod and he says nothing more as his hands slide from my face down to the sides of my neck, my shoulders, and toward my arms, almost like he’s tracing me. Like he can’t get enough of touching me. I shiver when his hands travel the length of my arm, his fingers weaving between mine, and I remember the exact item I’m missing when I feel his own brush against my bare finger.

Ripping my hand from the water, he stares where we’re linked together.

“Ariella, where the fuck is your ring?”

Erico

Possessiveness over a woman—over anything, really—isn't my game. Requires too much energy. Unless it's directly endangering the *Famiglia*, I don't care for it.

But fuck. Already, arriving home, I was tense because by the time the flight landed, hours had passed since messaging Ariella and Sebastian and neither had a good excuse for ignoring my texts. My nerves were frayed and I arrived home antsy and on edge, immediately searching out my wife, all for Carlotta to direct me outside.

Instead of going through my house, I purposely went around the building to practice calming down before I lost it on a woman who, I knew deep down, didn't deserve my wrath over a text. My soldier, now he'd be a different story, but I'd be dealing with him later.

That was the plan anyway. Take the long way, calm down, and reappear in Ariella's life as *not* an asshole. Then I witnessed how they were talking, the way he was looking at her, her body language, and mentally, I lost it. Years of my father's training in control prevented me from murdering my soldier right then and there in front of her.

It was discipline and unease I even had that passing thought that prevented me from spending the rest of my afternoon disposing of a body. Possessiveness over something I own is natural, but less so, if I don't care

for them. Besides the promise of the *Famiglia*'s future, deep down, I shouldn't care about Ariella. *Don't* care about her.

So why did my jaw clench, and my stomach knot, witnessing her smile back at him? Carefree and easy and unlike anything I've received from her in our video calls. The short chats I didn't realize, until seeing her in the pool, I was clinging to so desperately, knowing they were something only her and me shared. That even when gone, she agreed to meet with me.

And then, when I directed him away, and she spoke to him with her hands, purposely using the language both know I don't comprehend to share their final, secret message had me seeing red. Worse, because he nodded back. He *understood*.

Fucking sign language.

How does he know sign language?

They've been talking in a code I don't understand. They have a connection while I'm left on the sidelines.

And I don't know how to feel about that, other than my body's reaction —knotted and tense with flashes of death coursing through my mind— telling me I feel *something* about this. Something not positive either…

Death would be too kind for the young soldier who gazed at her like she was his sun. A fucking *sirena*. Meant to lure men in with her striking hair, inquisitive eyes, and flawless body. She did precisely that when I met her at Nico's party, and Sebastian's fallen into her trap, putting us all where we presently are.

Initially, I planned on only dropping in to see her and by tonight, I'd be back in my Manhattan condo until the next time I felt like visiting. When I felt it suitable to reconnect with her in person, but now leaving seems impossible. Not only because she'll be alone with Sebastian again, but gazing down at her…I don't *want* to.

I entered the pool with the intention of showing her exactly what it means to be my wife. What I'm allowed to *take*, until I got close to her and the reminder of who I am. What I won't be to her had me pausing. The thought of traumatizing her further, in different ways, has me sick to my fucking stomach so I had to cool that unwelcome possessive feeling that had me craving to claim her. To bend her over the edge of the pool and slam deep inside her cunt, using what I had already purchased. What is rightfully *mine*. What, after dealing with my father and Vegas, I *need*.

Catching her without her goddamn ring on only shoots another wave of fury through my bones. It's the only emotion I've felt since arriving home, and it's getting tiresome, but she makes it impossible to not be angry. We both agreed to this union, but at first chance, she discards the symbol of our connection.

Fuck. That.

Logically, she could have simply removed it for swimming, but it's the dead look in her eyes suggesting otherwise.

Hauling her away from the pool's siding, I drag her toward the stairs, wrenching her along with me. As I rise from the water, it pours off me in a heavy downfall, slashing against the cement and soaking it instantly. Climbing into the pool nearly fully dressed may not have been my finest moment, but it was a necessity to prove a point.

With the last shred of my sanity, I head for the lounge chairs and release her only to wrap her in the towel. I tell myself it's to ensure she doesn't drip water everywhere, but really, it's to ensure she's warm in the air-conditioned mansion.

"Go." I gesture toward the back door after retrieving my phone, watch, and wallet from where I've discarded them on one of the lounge chairs. "Lead me to wherever you hid your fucking ring."

If she threw it in the ocean behind us, I'll murder something. Not her—never her. But something. Someo*ne*.

She passes me, her spine stiff, and heads right through the mansion's back entrance, passing Carlotta cleaning the kitchen. A quick sweep of the immediate area finds it scarce of Sebastian, so at least he's still clinging to some instinct.

Ariella heads down the stretch of the house, into the front foyer, and immediately up the stairs. Her steps are mechanical and stiff and she never glances behind her, to check if I'm following. As we approach our bedroom, some of my nerves unwind. If it's in here, it's safe.

Inside the room, I scan the unmade bed, and for some reason, it brings a smile to my face, knowing that's where she's been sleeping. It's a fleeting smile though, since the second she heads for the room's far corner, it's gone. She crouches, presumably retrieving her ring.

It meant so little, she tossed it away like garbage.

I should be pissed, except I'm not. Instead, there's another emotion I feel so infrequently, but I'm…sad.

She returns to my side, the jewellery pinched between two fingers, and I snatch it from her, taking her left hand in the same movement and jamming it onto her fourth finger.

“This stays here from now on. I see it gone again, and I’ll solder it to your hand. Don’t test me.”

With a pinched expression, she rips her hand away and turns toward the bed, partially climbing on it as she reaches for something in the centre. Her position stretches out her body, water abandoning her swimsuit to instead cling to the bedspread. When she stands, she’s holding her phone.

Which explains why my text messages and calls went unanswered. I likely sent them after she began swimming. I can’t be pissed about that any longer. Sebastian still has shit to answer for though.

Without looking at me, she types on it, and my phone pings almost instantly.

ARIELLA

Awfully angry and possessive of a man who wants nothing to do with me and this marriage.

Is that what this is about? I wouldn’t have wed her if I didn’t want the marriage.

I’m about to answer when another message comes through.

ARIELLA

I wasn’t the wife you were supposed to have, and I get it. Your role demands other things. Like you said, we’ll get you an heir, and that’ll be it. Therefore, inside the house, if we’re not going to act like a couple, what’s the point?

My mouth runs dry with no response while she regurgitates what I already said to her. Of course, she’s questioning my willingness, because I’ve stated as such. I should walk away and use this. Let the understanding of our marriage truly set in for us both. Officially begin it now, since leaving right after the ceremony was confusing on all levels.

I *should* do all of that, but instead, my mouth opens, and the words that pour from me aren’t the ones I should be saying. “The point is that *we* are married, Ariella. You took the vows. You accepted the ring.”

She sets her jaw as her fingers fly over her phone.

ARIELLA

A ring you bought for another woman.

That's what she thinks?

You didn't exactly suggest otherwise at any point. Fuck.

Ariella stares at me for a beat, a yearning bringing her teeth over her bottom lip. A full minute passes before she blinks, accepting, and turns toward the closet, obviously giving up on me. She manages a step before something flashing in my head throws my arm to the side. It loops her waist and tugs her right to my side with an addictive, little gasp from her. A hint of her voice, and with that, I crave more. Her body presses against mine, my arm keeping her waist to me, my height making it so I'm looking down on her.

"I bought this ring for *you*, not Aurora. Hers wasn't purchased yet." In truth, I was avoiding it. "This," I snatch her hand, bringing it between us, "was hand-picked by me because the emeralds are the exact shade of the dress you were wearing when we met. The moment I saw this one, I imagined it on only your hand. No one else's." When some of the tenseness in her shoulders deflates, when I feel like I'm winning, I add softly, "I'm not the villain you're making me out to be, Ariella, but if it takes you time to realize that, then so be it."

Her mouth is right there, and like the pool, I want to kiss her. To lay her on the bed and grant her the wedding night she deserves. To spread her legs and explore everywhere, to peel down her swimsuit and discover the heat between her thighs. I want to see if she prefers to be dominated or to dominate.

Because that'll tell me how right or wrong we are for one another. How mechanical and forced producing an heir will be, or, with time, we can come to enjoy one another.

I shouldn't even care about that—any of that. I meant what I initially told her and there's no suitable reason I'd be considering otherwise. I should release her. Back away. Leave this bedroom and be done with this. Leave this house entirely and return to the city. We can go forward as friends until the day I need to begin producing the *Famiglia's* future. So many shoulds, and I don't do any of them.

I hold her. Stare at her. Spot the glimmer of hope reignite in her eyes.

Fuck.

I can’t do this with her. *To* her. Meet her expectations all to rip them away from her when I won’t be who she desires. My parents, for all their drama, have an amicable relationship. Romance-less, based on what I’ve witnessed, but not hatred.

That’s what I need to duplicate here. Ariella must comprehend it’s not okay to go without her ring, and it’s less okay to despise me. But we can be friends. Comfortable companions throughout our lives together. Never romantic in the way she’s hoping for us to be, all based on that little shine in her depths.

Another chill of protectiveness runs through me, but it’s strikingly different than before, when I arrived to see her in the backyard with Sebastian. That was driven by stupid jealousy; this is to keep her safe. Being protective over Ariella means no harm will come to her—not even from me.

So I release her and back away two steps, turning my head to avoid witnessing the emotions pass over her expression. I head for the closet, quickly undressing and changing into dry clothes.

Once I’m refreshed, I return, finding her standing exactly where I’ve left her. “Change and come downstairs for food. I’m hungry.”

I exit the bedroom, without looking toward her, and head to the kitchen, requesting Carlotta to whip something up quickly. While she works, I head toward my office and text the only soldier who’d be hanging around the mansion.

Sebastian’s standing in my doorway within minutes, and shuts the door when I gesture him closer. He stands straight on the other side of my desk, his expression flashing in nerves before smoothing entirely, and I respect that. He’s trying to hide his emotions.

Getting straight to the point, I start. “Your family has been working with mine for generations. You’re a good kid, Sebastian, and I chose you for this task out of respect for your father and grandfather. I also hoped, with your age, you’d be less intimidating to my wife.”

“Yes, sir,” is all he wisely replies with, his throat moving with his swallow.

“You know sign language.” It’s a statement.

His head bobs in a jerky nod. “My kid nephew was born deaf. It’s a skill my entire family learned to communicate with him.”

One apparently Ariella knows too. A fact the Corsettis should have mentioned.

“Was it difficult to learn?”

Sebastian shrugs a shoulder, some of his tenseness already easing as he realizes I’m not reprimanding him. In truth, I brought him in here without a concrete plan. He needs a reminder of his place, but can I deny her a connection to someone else?

Yes. I could.

“Not really,” he answers. “Depends how good you are at learning stuff like that, I guess. I began with the letters and basic words, and then slowly built up. Like anything, it requires time and practice.” He pauses, glancing over his shoulder and then continues, like whatever he was thinking about reaffirmed his choice to add, “Mrs. Rossi’s been helping me actually. Given how infrequently I see my cousin, my sign language is rusty, but talking with her has been helping.”

“Hm.” I stand and he paces back a step, his eyes widening as I wander to the side of my desk, propping my hip there with my arms crossing over my chest. “Don’t see this as a negative thing, Sebastian, but I will be reassigning you. You’ll return to your old duties with one slight alteration.”

Another jerky nod, a gulp, and a flash of disappointment, telling me I’ve made the right decision. “Okay, sir. What’s the alteration?”

“You will be teaching me sign language.”

Ariella

Ten minutes after Erico's left me to change into dry clothing, I head downstairs. I've tossed on jean shorts and a plain tee, and tied my wet hair up in a bun, dressing almost as simple as the tank and joggers I was wearing when he agreed to wed me.

On my hand, the heavy ass sign of ownership.

Because the giant bed, the closet with both our items, and this damn house isn't a proficient enough method to flaunt ownership, he just *had* to add the ring to it.

I'm being silly. Maybe. After all, marriage equals a wedding ring, and I know that. Della gazes at hers, almost dreamily, immediately causing my own jealousy to flare. More than anything, I crave the sign of partnership—not ownership. Being chosen by a man.

My stomach feels hollow, and not because of hunger. The irony in how our lives turned out is still a bitter taste in my mouth.

Erico's parting words flit through my mind.

"I bought that ring for you, *not Aurora…the emeralds are the exact shade of the dress you were wearing when we met…I'm not the villain you're making me out to be…"*

I *am* making him out to be a villain but only because he started it. He designed our life based on his own wants, and so be it. For a minute, when

he was holding me, it seemed like something had already changed…but no. Reality crashed down and he released me, not only physically, but the faint wishing I was losing myself to.

Our bed is more inviting than ever. To bury myself into it and not come out for the rest of the day because as much as swimming made my mood light, Erico's return sucked it all away. Even as I walk back downstairs, my limbs lack energy, compelling me in one direction only—to the bed.

But before the master of the house drags me downstairs, because I suspect that's what would happen, I obey his earlier command. At the bottom of the steps, I pass Sebastian, who barely spares me a glance before disappearing out the front entrance.

Not even a wave to the person he's spent all morning talking to? If I wasn't already feeling my energy and mood drain, that knocked it down another peg.

Before Erico finds further reason to bitch, I head toward the kitchen, only for Carlotta to immediately redirect me to the attached dining room. A place Sebastian showed me in the tour, but there's yet to be a reason to use it.

At one end of the ten-person table, there's Erico, an iPad in one hand and a mug of coffee in the other. The entire stretch of the table has been cleared, except for the opposite end, where a serving plate, glass of water, and fork and knife wait.

"Sit, Ariella. Join me." A command given without even looking up from his tablet.

I see how it is. I all but march my way to the far end and sit, staring at him. All this and for what? I could be eating lunch at the kitchen island, how I have been since he dropped me off. Or, better yet, poolside, per the original plan before Erico decided to reclaim his position as lord of my cage.

Nico warned me to keep my temper in check, not that he'd ever seen me upset before, but cautioned me still. Behind closed doors, the Rossi family could potentially be worse than they publicly display, and Nico was determined to make me realize how precarious my place would be.

Slumping into my seat, I sit in silence. For once, affliction aside, while waiting for something to happen. Is this his attempt at displaying power? Drag me from the pool and force me to sit through lunch with him, all while he ignores me.

I don’t realize I’m gripping the edge of my seat until Carlotta’s footsteps break my glare. She heads to my side first, resting a glass of iced tea in front of me—a drink she’s learned I enjoy—and then a fresh chicken Caesar salad. Crispy lettuce, the ideal number of croutons, freshly shaved parmesan, all mixed with a creamy salad dressing, making my mouth water nearly immediately.

I smile at her to say thanks before she walks to Erico’s end of the table. For her, he glances away from the iPad, murmurs something I don’t catch, and then she leaves us alone. The second she’s gone, he returns to the device and begins eating, all without looking away from the tablet. My sigh is small, more of a disappointed huff, as I stab the lettuce with my fork. I hoped Erico inviting me down here was for a reason, but no. I’m simply an object for him to control.

A fact I’m already well aware of, but don’t need the reminder. Knowing and experiencing it is different.

While delicious, the salad tastes almost bland. That’s what happens when the dreary clouds consume me, though. The room’s air feels neither warm nor cool. The food is both tasty and bland.

Walls. Right, my walls. My mask. How I managed for months around Della. She never suspected, even before the accident. It feels harder now—more challenging to *want* to put my mask back on, but while Erico doesn’t even look at me, doesn’t inquire about my meal, the difficulty is becoming less and less. Hiding my mood changes for the rest of our lives *should* be impossible, but if this is how my life will go—being ignored—then no, it’ll be all too simple. Especially when he runs off to his city apartment and leaves me here alone, in this mansion.

Mask is on, walls are up, and I finish the remainder of my salad, sip some of the iced tea, and drop my fork onto the plate with a purposeful clang to announce I’m done.

Nothing. Not even a blink as he too scoops his final bite into his mouth.

Got it. Message received. Time to go die in bed.

I stand, shoving my chair away with annoyed huff, and walk toward the doorway. At first, I believe he’ll let me go, but then he talks in a low voice, pulling me to a pause.

“When I am present, you will join me for every meal. We will get to know one another before I introduce you to your role. This is a kindness to you, so be grateful. Given my recent promotion, I might be in and out for

the next while. And you just got more valuable to my enemies. You will never leave these grounds without a bodyguard. I will not have you risk your life."

Because then who else would give you your heir?

Getting to know one another…is that what this farce was?

Thoughts course through my head until all I manage is a jerky nod before escaping out the dining room, past the kitchen, and toward the sitting room with the brightly coloured tropical fish. I'm exactly like them. Trapped in a small space, circling the glass until they go insane.

The windows all around me, the ocean beyond, this is my tank.

My deep sigh could probably be heard by Erico if he cared to listen.

Every fibre of my being longs to lie in bed for the remainder of the day, or until he drags me from it for supper, whichever comes first, but I don't. Instead, I head back outside to the backyard, letting the warm, summer air wash over me. Ideally, it'd replace my earlier mood, but seems the weight is much too heavy. The darkness too grim to see through.

With Erico returned, my mask will never come off again. It's slipped in the past few days while I've been mostly alone, but Erico isn't allowed to witness that vulnerability.

I pass the tempting pool, but the image of him caging me has tainted the activity for today, so with a scowl, I walk toward the edge of the land, where the glass fence keeps me safe, and kneel on the ground, pushing myself as close to the barrier as possible. Below me, gentle waves rock against the land.

So fucking tempting to immerse myself within that water. To leap in and allow it to take me to new places. Maybe somewhere I'll find genuine happiness.

I never would, of course, but would Erico care? Would he search for my body beneath the waves?

Probably not. You're replaceable.

The wind picks up, the sun sets, and my body grows numb with the evening chill, but still I remain. It's a pleasant sensation, and when

Carlotta retrieves me for dinner, casting worried looks every step, I ignore her.

She leads me into the dining room where Erico already waits before backing away, leaving us alone. Without a word, I slink to my seat at the far end of the long table.

His dark gaze lifts from his wine glass as he stalks my steps. “You sat outside all day, and into the evening. Not the wisest or safest, Ariella.”

Reprimanding me? You can’t care that much if you never checked on me.

I shrug.

Carlotta returns with two plates of pasta, and I couldn’t have asked for tastier meal. Pasta is my weakness; the carbs no concern, given its deliciousness. I dig right in, spinning the fork until I have what’s probably an unhealthy amount of pasta on the utensil. Which I shove right into my mouth, all beneath Erico’s amused gaze.

“Enjoy pasta, huh? That’s something you haven’t mentioned.”

There’s a lot I haven’t mentioned to you.

“Be sure to serve that on the dinner menu at the next party.”

Excuse me?

A fact provided by numerous sources pre-marriage, but it was easily ignorable when Erico left for Vegas. A dinner party involves people from his life. People who’ll undoubtedly want to pay respects to their boss’s wife.

To me.

The pasta suddenly holds no flavour.

“My mother’s expecting it soon, but I’ve told her, we’d discuss it. Until you’re settled, there’s no rush.”

Settled. Not comfortable. Like a brand-new puppy brought to the home. Unsure of where to go and how to act, but with time, trained to be calm and *settled* until the owner deems them fine to be around others.

My responding smile is tight, more lips clamped together. After this, I’m escaping to bed. It’s late enough to call it a day. I’ve human-ed enough.

When I go to bed, then what happens? This will be the first night Erico and I sleep in the same bed. Given his promotion, will he already begin trying for an heir? Based on earlier, though, he did say it’d be in my control. Maybe he’ll head back to the city and will save us both.

Erico cuts into my train of wayward thoughts. “After dinner, I have a meeting. Don’t wait up because I may be late to bed.”

I nod, because what else is there to do? At the very least, he answers my curiosity. Ideally, sleep will have already claimed me by the time he comes to bed. It’s strange for a man who claims to want to lead separate lives to also want to share a bedroom when there’s other rooms in this massive place.

Appearances? Who’s the show exactly for? Not his staff, considering they’d be paid to keep quiet.

After my final bite of pasta, I manage a deep, calming breath, though it does little for my mood. I dismiss myself by standing and don’t look toward him. Erico doesn’t speak, and I slip from the dining room.

Erico

Ariella escapes the dining room, leaving me with a sudden urge to chase her. I'm smart enough not to entertain my desires and remain seated, hand clenching my fork for something to focus my strength on that *isn't* spreading her legs on our bed, licking my dessert from her cunt.

The moment I taste her cunt will be the moment I lose control completely, which is why I can't. How easy would it be to become obsessed with her? To be so would be unhealthy and distracting.

Already, by staying here and not heading back to the city is a horrible idea that invites further issues.

Growing up, I didn't have the same loving parents as those others my age did. Caladin's parents, before their deaths, were so utterly in love with one another and it always amazed me how the two brothers—my father and Caladin's—could enter their unions with completely different stances. Once, despising how Mother and Father basically ignored one another, I vowed to use my aunt and uncle as an example for my future marriage instead. But that was when I was an optimistic teenager. The longer my training, the more I realized what being my father truly meant for the *Famiglia*, and the better I understood his stance on marriage. Loving Mother would have distracted him. He gained my utter respect for doing what he needed to.

That's the stance I'm following. Falling deeper into the *Famiglia* means doing right by them. Now more than ever.

Already, she'd have a target on her back if any of my enemies learned I was married. Simply being my wife puts her in danger, but if I loved her… if they knew I had a weakness…we'd both be fucked. And that's *her* death, but if she cared for me and I died; if a stray gunshot made her a widow, I'd leave this earth by shattering her heart and soul. Even I'm not that selfish.

Focus. That's how to be a proficient Boss.

When Aurora Corsetti's hand in marriage was offered, given her strange upbringing away from her family, she seemed like an easy option. She'd be independent and perhaps happy to be left alone, given it was how she was raised. She'd be the ideal mafia wife.

With Ariella, that's not the case. Perhaps because I met her while engaged to someone else, I *allowed* myself to be intrigued. To let the façade slip out of unbridled interest. Then finding myself wed to the very woman who sparked the intrigue, I was doomed before this began.

It takes Carlotta entering the dining room to clear away our empty dishes to break my stare with the doorway. After thanking her for the delicious meal, I go to my office for my meeting with Sebastian. Learning sign language is counterintuitive; finding a new communication strategy for the woman I require distance from isn't wise.

Still, when I spot the young soldier leaning beside my office door, I welcome him inside, ordering him to sit instead of going away.

Sebastian perches on the edge of his chair as he watches me take my own seat. He's obviously still tense from earlier, uncertain, but he'll realize in time, teaching me to speak to her in alternative means is enough of an apology from him.

"Teach me the basics. We'll go from there."

"The alphabet will be good. When in doubt, you could spell what you want to say."

"Proceed then."

~

Over an hour later, my head is packed full of all the signs for the alphabet, as well as the gestures to greet someone. Hello, I've

memorized. The letters, maybe half of them.

“Thank you, Sebastian. I’ll text you when I have time for another lesson.”

“Sounds good.” Sebastian leaves my office unscathed, his steps quickening by the door. He’s a patient teacher, and in another life, one where he didn’t induct himself into the crime, territory battles, and weapon and drug deals, he’d be a good school teacher. He’s also a damn good solider from a great and loyal line of men, so I’d never offer him an out. Not that I think he’d take it.

Alone again, I pick up my phone, glancing over the text message received only moments ago.

CALADIN

10pm. Rio’s bored and he’s betting 10k on this.

Racing is the second-best feeling in the world and when I can, I drive in every event, every bet. Rio’s races aren’t as often anymore since he nearly got caught and thrown in jail, so he’s scared to attract the law’s attention again. He won’t because when I learned of his arrest, one phone call got him free, and the police are aware not to touch him again. Rio always brings in the best drivers, creating races with the highest stakes, and I can’t have my only form of entertainment locked away. Once, I debated bringing Rio in, making him my staff, meaning the *Famiglia* would get a cut of the profits, but I actually enjoy participating in something *not* in my control.

I’ve won almost every race too.

The offer is extremely tempting since it’s been a while since Rio hosted a race. Ten thousand dollars is chump change compared to the Rossi fortune, but nonetheless, useful and easy cash.

ME

I’ll be there.

I type it, but don’t send the text. Ariella is likely asleep by now and wouldn’t notice me gone and yet, my thumb is hovering over the send button before backspacing and replacing it with different words:

ME

Pass.

Still tired from travel.

The races are held on a few different roads—one in Brooklyn, some in Queens—and all are far away from here. After the race, it'd be quicker to return to my condo rather than the hours-long drive back here, which is a benefit, but still…

Knowing Caladin, he'll question me since I almost never turn down the offer of a race, and though a part of me desperately needs the exhilaration, the escape driving that fast brings, my lie remains as I exit my office and head to my bedroom where my sleeping wife is.

Christ.

She doesn't know this, and never will, but Ariella's the first woman to be in my bed. First woman other than my mother and staff to even be in this house. Previous hookups are not brought here because I enjoy my privacy and won't risk a stranger in my space—whether that's here or my condo. Having a woman be aware of where I live, or even internal facts such as my love for tropical fish, can be risky. People can do insane shit with basic facts, and in my role, one can never be too careful.

My wife will own many firsts.

The bedroom doors tap gently as they shut, and I realize I have no idea if she's a light sleeper and the subtle noise woke her up. She hasn't moved, but she could be faking. I tread to the closet, stripping as I go.

The closet's light casts a strip over the carpeted floor and right onto her. She's sleeping on her side, one arm tucked beneath the pillow while the other is against her chest. She'd look so peaceful, if not for the slight furrow to her brow, the tightness in her jaw. Whatever's in her head, it's preventing her body from completely relaxing. Nonetheless, she's breathing evenly, the blanket rising and falling in gentle movements. She's on the very edge of the bed, almost like pushing herself farthest away from my side.

After slipping on pyjama pants, so she doesn't find me naked, I go to the bathroom to quickly wash up, making a mental note to shower in the morning, and then walk toward the bed.

But not my side. Not right away.

I go to hers, inspecting that dip in her brow that I touch. Her skin is smooth and for once, her guard is down, so I can't help myself but trying to ease her. When she shifts, I yank my hand away, and return to my side of the bed.

My side. Before days ago, this entire bed was mine, and now there's sides.

Once I’m beneath the blankets, the space between us feels even greater. Emotional, mental, and physical.

This is good.

But not what I want.

I lie down facing her, wondering if she’s felt me slip into bed. Probably not because she’s still *on* the bed. Somehow, I get the sense if she knew, she’d suddenly find the floor to be a better place to rest.

Right when I close my eyes, Ariella whimpers. She lets out a pained moan that has me reaching for her. Her head rolls back and forth on the pillow, the dip between her eyes growing more prominent. Her mouth moves, her eyelids fluttering.

Nightmare?

Is this what the last few nights have been like? What her *life* has been like? Restless sleeper or nightmares from her traumatic accident?

I reach for her again, when her mouth parts, her sound freezing me.

“Mom!”

A sob, a scream, a thrashing, and then like the accident: sudden silence.

Sleep takes her under again.

I don’t move. I *can’t* move.

She spoke.

Well, screamed.

But I heard her voice. Throaty but also soft. Packed of a fear I want to protect her from. To help her talk again without the heavy emotion dragging her down.

She mumbles incoherently and shifts, rolling until her face is shoved into the pillow, a position I’d normally smirk at, but my insides are still numb because there’s nothing amusing in her display of fear.

It was great enough to break through her other fears, the ones the trauma’s created. The ones preventing her from speaking with anyone but her sister.

Ariella’s mutism was a fact I was prepared to live with when I agreed to marry her. A challenge we’d overcome together, and learning sign language is one step in that direction—albeit an unseen step at the time.

But it’s now more. There’s something deeper there I wish to help her unfold, to *heal* her from her struggles, so she doesn’t have another nightmare ever again.

Do I mention this in the morning?

No, I decide. I won't because I get the sense, she'd hide from me even more, simply to prevent me from witnessing her nightmares. Or she'd attempt to move out of our room. And do I really want to mention that she's likely reliving the moment she lost her mother?

Based on the intel my men discovered, we're days away from the anniversary of her mother's death, reminding me to reach out to Nico. For Ariella's sake, I doubt he'll deny my request to return to Montreal, so she can be with her sister on the day.

Once Ariella's silent, I return to lying on my back, staring at the white ceiling until sleep decides to come. It never does, and after a few more minutes, another whimper bursts through the silence.

Fuck this.

Despite everything I said earlier, my actions come from a place of wanting to care for her. When's the last time anyone actually held her, told her it'd be okay, and let her cry it out? Has she had a solid cry in the near three years since the accident?

I want to be that for you.

Want and need are very different things, though. More so, what *she* wants. People are typically easy to read, but Ariella, fuck, I can't piece her together.

Looping my arm around her waist, I pull her to my bare chest, tightening my hold so she can't go anywhere. She won't know about this, not if I wake before her, which is likely since I'm an early riser.

She whimpers again and tries to pull away. A weak attempt only lasting the blink of an eye before she sighs and settles.

It's there, late at night, holding my new wife for the first time, I realize what I refuse to act on.

I'm too intrigued by her to completely ignore her.

Ariella

I went to bed alone, and when I wake, I'm still alone. Based on the dip in the mattress, Erico had come to bed at one point, but after a quick pat, the sheets are cool, which tells me he's been gone for a while.

Likely woke to avoid you.

It's that low thought making getting out of bed arduous, but if I don't, Erico will wonder, and if he looks close enough, he might see what others don't.

So I go through the motions. Get out of bed, shower, tie my wet hair up, and dress in the first thing my hands touch—jean shorts and a simple blouse—before slipping downstairs, keeping my steps as quiet as possible. No one's around, which feels odd, but the silence is pleasant, as is not having staff wait on me.

After pouring a mug of coffee, I walk the length of the house toward the music room. It's too early for a swim, and music's my only other option in this large place. At no time do I see Erico, but it's not all that surprising, even if a stupid part of me was wishing to.

He's probably gone by now. Returned to the city for work and his condo, far away from me.

As expected, the large room is empty, with only my piano tucked in the corner. There's nowhere to rest my mug, other than the floor because I don't

want to risk staining the piano, but perhaps I'll ask for a small table.

When I reach the piano, there's a coaster on top, and with a silly smile, I rest my mug on it. Someone foresaw this issue. Carlotta is extremely likely, but somehow, I feel it was Erico, playing his games again.

Once the coffee's in its new place, I lift the bench's lid, having found it to be a storage space, ideal for keeping my notebook in. At first, I nearly didn't, since it's the book I've clung to for so long, the pages only I've read, and having it in here means it's vulnerable to others' eyes. But if I'm to live out my life here, I can't keep my possessions in a tiny bag I guard forever.

My heart slows with ease when I retrieve it unharmed and open to the last page I was working on, trialling a few new notes and rewriting lyrics as I've whispered them to myself.

Hours pass, or that's what it feels like, when the door opens and my back prickles with the knowledge of who's intruded.

So he hasn't returned to the city.

"Heard you skipped breakfast, and now it's lunch. You must be hungry."

Shrugging, I don't turn around. Maybe I am, but eating doesn't hold any appeal.

He crosses the room, his shoes making soft taps, which sound closer as he approaches. My breath aligns to each one, giving my mind a place to focus as he comes up behind me. Then his hand sweeps over my bare neck and I don't know what to do. How to react.

It's a gentle touch, but almost possessive too.

I'm torn between shutting my eyes and enjoying the sensation and pushing him away, protecting myself through this inevitable heartbreak.

"You play beautifully. The tune carries out of the room, and I'll be honest, I remained in the hallway, listening for a few minutes before entering."

Because he knew I'd stop playing once he entered. Deceptive…but sweet, I suppose.

No one's heard me play before and I feel like he deserves to be told that. Why? Not sure. A final thank you for the gift? I reach for my phone, which is beside my now-empty mug and type on it.

YOU’RE THE FIRST TO EVER HEAR ME PLAY PIANO.

He reads over my shoulder. “Besides Della?”

WE DIDN’T HAVE A PIANO WHEN I LIVED WITH HER OR GROWING UP. I TAUGHT MYSELF IN HIGH SCHOOL IN THE MUSIC CLASSROOM AFTER SCHOOL. MAYBE THE MUSIC TEACHER OVERHEARD, BUT THAT’S ALL.

“I’m honoured.” His touch sweeps where my hair and neck meet again. “Come eat, and then return.”

Since he’s not being an ass today, I’ll entertain his niceties. When I shut the piano’s lid, he backs away, giving me the space to stand. Turning, I see him for the first time today. He’s dressed more casually—casual for him at least. Slacks and his normal shiny shoes, a button-up shirt that’s rolled at the sleeves, portraying muscular arms that I think I’d enjoy around me. His hair isn’t as styled, like he rolled from bed and never bothered fixing it. It makes him look younger, more boyish…cuter.

I hold up my phone with a message I quickly type before I can stop myself:

YOU’RE HERE.

He smirks. “As opposed to where?”

YOUR CONDO. YOUR WORK. NOT HERE.

He glances away quickly, licking at his lips. Nerves? “Yeah, I…I think I’ll stay here for a while. Work from my office.”

My heart thumps erratically. While I can’t assume, I am, assuming the reason behind his ongoing presence. Me. Why he’s not taking off might be something he’ll never admit, and I should *want* him to go and leave me in peace, but this means something. Right?

He leads me from the room, but to the backyard instead of the dining room. The sun’s shining bright, reflecting over the pool and into my eyes, so I shield my face with my hand.

By the poolside, a small table has been set up with two covered plates. I tip my head in question as he leads me to the chair facing the lake.

“You seem to enjoy the outdoors and we only have a couple months until it’s cold, I figure why not soak up as much sunlight as we can. Besides, I’d like to get to know my wife better.”

Since when?

He takes his own seat across from me and I search his expression for his duplicity. I'd prefer it was there, only to quell the confusion in me.

I rest my phone on the table, opening the messenger app to be prepared for any reply I must give. Not sure what the man possibly wants to know, but I pretend to care about his interest with my mask firmly on, my smile fake and pleasant, practiced from my days with the Corsettis.

"When did you realize you enjoyed music?"

And so, it begins.

After lunch and twenty questions, my smile became less fake and practiced and more real. More authentic, even while red flags were being erected in my mind.

Why is he being nice all of sudden?

What does he want?

Is this some sort of mating ritual? Ease me before he breeds me. Then he can be finished with his job, and we can both move on.

Erico's asked me all the questions people in long-term relationships should know about their partners. He not-so-subtly skipped over my post-high school years, when Stefano came into our lives, and of Mom and the accident.

He was patient while I responded by text. If he got annoyed, then he wore his own mask and hid the emotion well. Even Della gets irritated sometimes because my murmured short sentences are less than what she grew up receiving. When Nico visited me at the medical centre to ask about Della, he was so agitated while I wrote my responses on a whiteboard, it was nearly amusing. Lorenzo Corsetti never spared me much time, and Caterina, if she was annoyed, did manage to keep her mask on as well.

Half of lunch was spent watching every curve of his face, of his eyes, which often reveal what a voice won't, the skin around them for any crinkle and indication of annoyance, of his mouth, watching for any tick.

Nothing. Patient as ever.

I didn't like how it made me feel.

Comfortable.

Every time I feel comfortable, something bad happens.

Moving into Stefano De Falco's home was something I fought Mom over, but slowly—*very slowly*—I became eased. And then the accident occurred.

The medical centre was where my depression felt the worst, when my only visitors were Della and Yasmine. But my conversations with my stepsister were always at a minimum because she shouldn't have been there. They were almost downright uncomfortable meetings for us both. By the time I accepted the centre, I was yanked from it and forced to, yet again, conform to new standards within the Corsetti household.

So it's bound to happen soon. Erico's kindness will come with a price I'm not equipped to pay.

He leads me back to the music room, and with a parting smile, leaves me alone again to head back down the same hallway, toward his office. Confusion swirls over if lunch did what he wanted.

Or did it do what I needed?

Erico

After a pleasant lunch and returning Ariella to her music room, I regretfully head for my office. I'd rather watch her play, but business is stacking up in the days I was away in Vegas. Father dumped a lot on me—probably to see me either rise to the occasion or fail.

My intrigue with my wife is truly an unwanted distraction. The moniker I once called her floats through my mind: *Sirena.* She really is a fucking siren, right down to her fondness for swimming, her adoration of water, her dream of owning tropical fish, and her musical talents—some of those facts uncovered in my many questions during our meal.

Tropical fucking fish. As a child, I begged Mother for them after she denied all my other requests for aquatic creatures, which as an adult, I see why she had. In a household with staff, ownership meant not having to actually care for them, so she agreed. Years later, I continue to keep tropical fish, always replacing when I lose one.

Now, I wouldn't get rid of them for the world, making my wife's dreams come true even unknowingly.

My phone vibrates for the millionth time today. Every time Ariella was texting me a response, three more from other people also arrived. Soldiers, my mother, Caladin. All with varying degrees of business, so when I'm

back at my desk, I have enough of a distraction to keep me away from Ariella and her music for hours.

First: Caladin's messages, since they're simplest.

CALADIN

Dude, you gotta come back to the races. Some big names in town. Rio's looking for you, man, because some huge challenges. They're determined to beat you. Get out of your wife's pussy and come. 10pm for the next three nights are lined up. I've already told them you'd be here so don't be a letdown.

Caladin is correct in that I should return to my hobbies, a reminder of my life before Ariella. If my lessons with Sebastian end earlier, then yeah, I can make these, even with the three-hour drive toward the city for these. Three hours there, three hours back, plus the time spent racing. Fuck, that's the entire evening and well into the middle of the night by the time I return.

Or you can just stay at your condo.

Unlikely.

ME

Count me in.

CALADIN

Reread my message. You didn't have a choice.

Chuckling, I close that message thread and open the one I have with my mother. She's texted and called all day, leaving voicemails each time I denied the call. As much as this conversation is the last thing I wish to have, she's easier to deal with over voice than arguing over text. So I tap her name and initiate the return-call.

"What?" I demand the moment she picks up the phone.

"That's not a respectful way to speak with your mother. I never raised you like this."

You barely raised me at all.

Rather than fight about the past, I lower my tone to replace annoyance with fake pleasure. "Apologies, Mother. There's a lot going on. What can I help you with?"

"Did you not read my texts?" Her voice hikes higher, indicating she's about to go off. "Or listen to the *many* voicemails I left you?"

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I stare at the time in the corner of my laptop's screen, deciding this call will be limited to five minutes. Another four and half to go, and counting.

"I'd be here all afternoon when I have better things to do, so no, I did not."

She sighs heavily as if I've demanded she sell all her designer shoes. "Or you can be a better businessman. And son."

"Or I can hang up and continue my job by talking with the actual businessmen I'm presently dealing with. What. Do. You. Want, Mother?"

Another heavy sigh, only this time she answers, "Dredging up the last thing we talked about: it's been days, Erico. Time for Ariella to make her debut to the organization. I'll even assist Ariella plan it."

"She needs nothing from you," I shoot back instantly. "Besides, I've already mentioned to Father, she needs more time to settle." I use the opening to not only change topics, but to solve a mystery. "Where did Father fly off to?" The Bratva's jet never landed in New York, which means he went elsewhere with them.

She completely ignores my question about Father's location. "This is why marrying that nobody was not wise, Erico. Even if she did link us to the Corsettis. Sometimes, the price isn't worth the outcome. If your father __"

"Stop," I cut her off, a burst of anger over her latest statement taking over. "My mother or not, *never* talk about my wife like that."

"Erico," she murmurs in her usual placating tone, "I simply meant, she's not exactly who we had in mind for you."

"Father wouldn't have made me Boss if he didn't trust in my abilities. The same goes for my wife's. You know better than anyone how it is. Your entire status in the *Famiglia* was due to Father's role. You *are* him. Ariella is *me*. *With* me. On my side, so fucking deal with it."

Another beat of silence and a low sigh. One I was likely not supposed to hear. When she talks again, her tone is more paced. "Like I was saying, you know the consequences of not hosting something for the organization soon. People need to meet your wife, Erico. She's their new *Famiglia* queen." Words spit with a tinge of bitterness. "You know I'm right."

My thumb and forefinger pinch my nose tighter because she fucking is. With our wedding being nearly a week ago, and planning a party would still take days, this shouldn't be held off much longer, out of respect for the

Famiglia's traditionalists. It'd be viewed as disrespectful not to host them soon.

But can I do this to Ariella already? Presumably the Corsettis warned her what being my wife would involve, but still…

"Pick a venue. Send me the date, time, and address. We'll be there."

"Uh, son, I think you missed the point. *Ariella* must plan this."

"You'll get your party, Mother, but do you really think a bunch of old fuckers will honestly care, or even distinguish, who put it together? Until she's more settled, I'm not forcing anything on her. This is my final word on the matter."

"Fine," Mother bites out. "Whatever, I'll do it better anyway. Tell your wife we need to plan a girl's outing eventually. I'd like to meet my daughter-in-law properly. I'm sure you don't have a problem with that." Her tone declares *I dare you to say otherwise.*

"Whenever she's ready. Goodbye, Mother."

Click.

With a groan, I rub both hands down my face, willing my head to erase that conversation. Before my next task, I pour a drink from the bottle of alcohol I keep stocked in here, taking a heady sip.

Moving on to more important things, I dial Nico Corsetti's number.

He answers on the first ring. "Corsetti."

"Nico," I greet, utilizing his first name instead.

"Erico. You're not who I expected."

"Sorry to disappoint."

"Funny. Heard congratulations are in order for the new *Famiglia* Boss. The news travelled quickly to us."

"I had no doubts of that, but thank you. And on yours as well." Days after my wedding to Ariella, Lorenzo handed over control to Nico, according to our intel.

"What has you calling today, when I'm sure you're very busy?"

Another sip of my drink before responding. "Ariella."

"Is she okay?" he asks with a bit more alertness than before. My flash of annoyance is quickly quelled since it goes to show how many people care for her well-being; a fact I'm curious if she's aware of.

"She's well. Settling. She's found some hobbies around the mansion to keep her busy. She's the purpose of my call but not the focus, per se." I pause, bringing up my calendar on my laptop, noting the date two days after

my three back-to-back races. “You must be aware the anniversary of Ariella and Della’s mother is approaching.”

“I am. Della and I will be taking a trip to the cemetery where she’s buried.” He pauses, his next statement said with bite. “Their dickhead of a stepfather never brought them to visit.”

If he’s taking Della there, then the stage is set. “Well, that’s why I’m calling. I’m seeking permission to enter your territory, on that afternoon, so she may pay her respects. I’ll bring a single soldier with me, and no weapons but my personal one—you understand.”

“Considering Della’s been hinting at having her sister come up, absolutely. It’ll be good for the two of them to have each other. If all goes well, I’d say we make it an annual standing agreement.”

This right here is the reason Corsetti over Volkov is preferred. Nico’s much simpler to deal with. There’s more humanity in his own dark heart, which softens for his wife. A weakness to anyone who wishes to do him harm, but given who my own wife now is, it makes him valuable to me. The power the Russians control isn’t worth the nuisance to gain it.

“We’ll tentatively set that plan,” I agree, “and we’ll be there in a few days.”

“I’ll have my driver pick you up on the airfield. I’ll text you my pilot’s information and yours can set the trip up with him and our airfield. See you then, Rossi.”

“Goodbye, Corsetti.”

A much more productive phone call than the one with my mother.

Downing the rest of my drink, I consider the rest of my tasks. Contracts Father started but never finished, that I now need to handle.

Shit to keep me busy and away from my wife.

Dinner is the same as lunch, only spent in the dining room. Unable to help myself, I continue to bombard her with questions, and am pleasantly surprised when she starts asking more of her own.

Afterwards, she gets ready for a swim while I retreat back to work. Except instead of sitting at my desk, I’m too busy observing her from my

office windows, hating with every fibre of my being how fucking impossible it's becoming to *not* watch her.

When the sun dips into the ocean, I'm about to demand she come inside, but then she wisely grabs her towel and leaves the pool. She wraps her body in the towel, covering her tiny, wet bikini that held way too much of my focus. Today's swimsuit was a pale blue.

Once she's inside the house, I get prepared to leave for the long drive to my race. According to Carlotta, Ariella heads to bed early each night. Which is strange because it's not like she's a super early morning riser, so it's curious how much she sleeps. No matter because it means she won't be up to inquire about my absence.

At dinner, she texted, asking about my own hobbies, which I semi-lied about and claimed I enjoy running. I *do*, as it's my preferred form of cardio, and something I complete every morning, but certainly not a hobby. Admitting I race to a woman who lost her mother in an accident feels insensitive.

Before exiting the mansion, I text Jack Scuttle, a fifty-year-old married man and Ariella's new bodyguard, requesting he remain in the house until I return. He's who I should have chosen as her guard from the beginning.

When I spot his car pull up to the front of the mansion, I throw him a quick wave and speed off in my McLaren 360. At the end of the road, I message Caladin, informing him I'm on my way with an estimated time of arrival.

The leather wheel beneath my grip feels smoother with the promise of what's coming. My shifting is smooth, effortless, as my speedometer climbs.

Every sense in my body attunes to the vehicle.

It's a thrill like nothing else in life.

It's adrenaline fuelling parts of me hidden from the rest of the world.

It's a high no drug compares to.

I think I'd like to share it with Ariella one day.

Ariella

Three days pass and with every minute, my confusion over Erico's actions grows.

The first day—the one after he dragged me outside for lunch and began this weird routine of twenty questions—he had a couch added to the music room. Padded, beige, and tucked across the opposite wall.

The second day, there was an entire sitting area. More chairs, and another couch added, along with a table.

The third day, a large desk pushed against another wall. This one had a note taped to it. An explanation, which didn't help clear *anything* up.

So you have a place to write your music.

The other furniture never came with such a note, but I learned why that first day. When hours after I found the couch, Erico entered the music room and sat on it. Propped one leg up over the other and merely challenged me with a lift of his brow when I glared.

Every day after that, he's come in.

Three days of him watching. Three days of silence. He doesn't talk or do anything when he's with me.

Three days of growing confidence because each day, after watching me play for hours, his only words come right as he's leaving, and it's always with the same statement: *'You play beautifully. I'd love to hear you sing one day.'*

We spend every meal together. Sometimes talking—him speaking, me texting—and sometimes not. He seems to set the atmosphere, which has me more and more frustrated, wondering if he's waiting for me to take charge one day.

He mentioned a party that his mother is hosting in our stead. A party *we're* supposed to put on, but apparently, he made it her task. I smiled and nodded when he told me because, while not stated, I understood what he actually did for me. Party planning is one of my tasks, as the Boss's wife, but he protected me this time. *This time.* Eventually, this moment will catch up with me.

Our days are relatively positive. Friendly. In the evening, when I swim, he locks himself in his office. But then at nighttime, he leaves the property.

Night one, I believed it was for business. He's a Boss of a mafia family after all, and even I'm aware that most of the underground sketchy deals occur at nighttime, away from prying eyes and under the cover of darkness. He leaves early in the evening because despite his claim to be working from his office, it's a long drive into the city. I assumed he wouldn't be back that night, but he crawled into bed around three in the morning, long after I passed out.

Night two, more business dealings. Same departure and arrival time.

Night three was when the darkness creeped into my thoughts. After two and a half days of feeling decent, with a stable mood that hasn't been taunting me with the temptation to hide in bed all day, it hit me. After he left the third night, it wiped away any progress I've been gaining. The pestering inner monster slithered in and snatched my heart again, my thoughts, and planted the negative ones.

Perhaps he's cheating. Took a mistress. You're not doing your job as his wife so of course he went elsewhere, to someone who will give him what he needs.

God, I tried to ignore the voice. Bury it beneath the deep-rooted feeling that I don't believe Erico would do that.

But it always has a counterargument. *He left it in your control. It's been a week and you've done nothing with him. He's gotten tired of waiting.*

Still, I push on. Pretend it's not bothering me. Convince myself, he's doing his job. But every evening, it's the exact same pattern, the same timings. Every night, when I go to bed and he comes into the bedroom to change from his suit to more casual clothing.

Every time, I try remain awake, staring at the time ticking away on my phone. But he's gone so long, I end up falling asleep. Which is probably best since my heart couldn't handle observing him sneak in during the middle of the night.

There's numerous reasons for his actions, and I know this, but the nagging, evil voice decides otherwise.

On my back in the pool, sunglasses on, I stare at the sun, seeking answers within the glaring rays. Nico blatantly warned me of this, having no precise insight into how the *Famiglia* manages relationships. He said this organization was as traditional as they come and keeping a mistress isn't unheard of.

That's what's crushing me. What makes me almost want to turn onto my stomach and drink in the chlorine until I become part of the pool water. It's one thing to give up my chance of finding a man who *chooses* to be with me, who wants me and the life we'll create and the children we'll have. I volunteered that chance away and accepted a man I'd hoped to find a shred of happiness with. But my silly heart hoped he wouldn't resort to *that*.

If he is…I don't know what I'll do. Living with it seems so impossible. Sickening.

What I *do* know, is I won't waste my life not knowing. Three days has sucked, but I won't spend a lifetime wondering, worrying, *pretending*. No. If he is, he'll admit it to my face so I can work through my emotional consequences.

Being mute, people stopped remembering who I am and who I was; all they see is the silent woman they deem to be 'quiet' due to the diagnosis. With all the changes in the last two years, this had been my armour against others, but before, I wasn't quiet *at all*. If someone pissed me off, they knew it. If I had an issue, I was vocal about it.

While I may be unable to speak to Erico with my voice, we *will* talk. It's a silent promise I make to myself and the sun above. And to him, where he watches me from his office window. He does so often, but I pretend not to notice. I refuse to live with the wonder, the fear, the heartbreak. More so, I

refuse to blame him for something he might not be doing. Miscommunication and misunderstanding are not for me.

And now's as good of a time as any. Rolling to my stomach, I paddle to the pool's stairs to exit, just as a shadow encompasses the cement.

I pause, halfway out of the water, and glance up at the stranger. A soldier, I presume, based on the similar clothing to Sebastian's, and even that I've witnessed the Corsetti soldiers wearing. His beard is speckled with white, as is his dark hair. He stands poised, arms behind his back, his expression flat, almost scary.

"Apologies for intruding, Mrs. Rossi, but Mr. Rossi mentioned you're out here and I wanted to introduce myself before we begin our travels tomorrow."

Tomorrow? What's happening tomorrow?

"My name is Jack Scuttle. I've been assigned as your bodyguard in place of Sebastian."

Sebastian's absence became obvious after day one. I texted him, only for him to ignore me. I did the same on day two and was ignored again. It wasn't hard to piece together who's at fault, and when I demanded an answer from Erico one supper, he skipped over answering.

It's pissed me off because speaking with Sebastian had been fun. Natural not to have to use my phone to communicate. Easier, and just someone to help break up my monotonous days. After the drama with Aurora, I understand the boundaries between soldiers and us, but all I wanted was a friend in this new world and he was an easy contender.

I look up at the man, at Jack, as I finish climbing out of the pool. His eyes remain on my face, respectfully, and even retrieves my towel. If I hadn't already guessed it, Jack's avoidance indicates the precise reason Erico sent Sebastian away, his response the day he found Sebastian and I talking also being further evidence.

Answers. I need fucking answers. Because *if* he took a mistress and I can't even have *a fucking male friend*…

With a final forced smile toward Jack, in which I aim to be polite because my sudden rage isn't at him, I ignore the offered towel and walk right into the house. Carlotta's vacuuming, and for a second, I feel bad to be making a mess, but at this point, I'm committed. Besides, she can blame Erico for my actions.

My wet feet slapping against the marble flooring echoes through the mansion, so perhaps he'll hear me coming. If not, he's certainly about to *hear* me in other ways.

I don't knock, don't wait for permission. Just throw open his office door, while cursing the fact my phone is outside and I have no actual way to yell at him.

By instinct, my mouth opens and—

Crash!

Metal scraping against metal.

Tires squealing.

Fucking Christ, not now.

My mouth snaps shut, my mutism a fucking curse. How can I act how I used to without speech?

"Ariella. A pleasant surprise." Erico shuts his laptop and pushes his chair back as though about to stand, completely ignoring the obvious rage I dredged in with me. His eyes flick down my body, pausing first on my breasts, and then between my legs. Lustful looks won't halt this conversation, even though they do make my core clench. "You're dripping water everywhere. Where's your towel?"

His phone is beside his laptop, so I gesture toward it, basically demanding him to unlock and hand it over. He opens a note app and slides the phone over his desk, toward me.

WHERE DO YOU GO AT NIGHT?

He reads upside down before I get the chance to spin the phone, and his mouth presses together. He shifts in his desk chair, and that's when the darkness returns. When my stomach sinks and any progress I feel we *might* have had evaporates.

"I didn't want to tell you."

I'm fucking correct…

TELL ME RIGHT NOW.

His dark eyes flick from the phone to me, unusually stormy. Like *he's* upset with *me*. "You asked for this. No one, besides Caladin, is aware, so keep this between us. It's a hobby the *Famiglia's* leader shouldn't be participating in, given it's not exactly what the organization would deem as a noble death in their name."

Dangers…something he shouldn't be doing. I think I assumed wrong.

"I street race."

Street race. I repeat the words in my head twice until they make more sense. He races…cars?

"You're confused."

I'm confused because I was wrong, I think.

Erico tilts his head and gestures for me to come around the desk, but I remain firm where I am. "You're confused because you assumed something else, correct? Something that had you storming in here, dripping water everywhere and soaking my carpet. What was it?"

Fuck. I hadn't considered how to handle this part. Hadn't figured out how to handle being wrong.

I wander closer. Not sure why. I tell myself it's so I can soak a larger area of his carpet.

With his phone in hand, I type another message:

> I WASN'T SURE. YOU CAME HOME IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT FOR THE PAST FEW DAYS. YOU SHOWER RIGHT AWAY. I ASSUMED.

"You were awake?" Then he shakes his head and reaches for me. His large hand binds my wrists, and with a quick jerk, I'm standing in front of him, my hips against the edge of his desk. Water drips from me onto his pants, which he ignores. "When I come home, I shower right away because of the environment and people I'm around. A lot of exhaust from the engines, people smoking all sorts of shit, and not exactly the cleanest areas of the city. I wash it all off before I get into bed."

That makes sense and now, I'm a greater idiot.

"The late timing is because it's a few hours to the city, but I return because I want to." His hand tightens around my wrist. "What was it you were assuming, wife? What, in that lovely head of yours, did you think I was doing?"

I don't want to say. He could get mad.

When I don't respond, Erico drops my wrist and with both hands, cups my waist, dragging me over his lap instead. A small squeak comes from me, as my legs naturally hug his hips until I'm in a crouching position over him. My bikini wets his clothing, and droplets from my hair slide down my back and onto his hands. Our chests are inches apart, the tense air we're each breathing, the same.

Holy shit.

Erico takes the phone between two fingers and reangles my hand until it's between us as he repeats, "What were you assuming?"

He's going to hate this, but I type:

> I THOUGHT YOU WERE CHEATING. THAT YOU HAD A MISTRESS.

Erico flinches the second he reads my message, but his expression remains impassive and without anger. His eyes shut, and he inhales deeply, before focusing on me again. He speaks in a low, measured tone. "I understand why you'd think that, but that's not me. I won't do that to you, I promise."

Empty words? I guess time will tell. I'd like to believe him this instance, but time changes shit. Personalities shift. Promises break. Villains emerge.

He strokes a hand down my back, fiddling with the ends of my soaked hair. "I'll admit, I'm now disappointed in myself."

With my nail, I find the place right over his heart and draw a question mark, hoping he catches my action and understands the question. It shouldn't be so easy to touch him, but I suppose, when one imagines this man beneath them late at night, dreams and hopes become vivid.

"Because I don't know how to *be* a husband, Ariella. I vowed not to create the kind of marriage my parents have, but as I spent more and more time with my father…well," he shrugs, his crooked grin making him seem years younger, "I understood the appeal. But then you fucking ran head-first into my life and shit changed. *I* changed. What I desired changed."

With his phone, I type:

> BUT YOU DIDN'T WANT A WIFE. YOU DON'T WANT ME.

"Yes to the first, no to the second. I didn't want a wife, you're right. What I told you in Nico's office was supposed to be the truth, but every day with you is making it impossible to stick to that plan because I *want you*. You intrigue me and you have since the moment we met. I'm sorry I didn't give you that impression. Like I said, my own ideals shattered with our marriage and I've been determined to fight against that change. But then there's times, I can't help myself. Watching you preform the piano every day for the hour I permit myself when I have other tasks I should be doing

doesn’t matter. Or sharing every meal with you. Working from home rather than the clubs. Living here rather than my condo. I’m *trying*, Ariella, but I need you to teach me how to be who you need.”

Oh. What happens when an airplane crashes into a brick wall?

The wall doesn’t make it.

Yeah.

Chip, chip, chip goes some of the bricks that make up my wall.

Am I good enough then? Has the little voice been wrong this entire time?

Impossible. That voice has always kept me safe.

I write to him:

> WHY DID YOU NEVER SAY ANYTHING ABOUT RACING?

He crooks another grin and his eyes rake down my form. “Do I need to spell it out? My wife stopped talking after a traumatizing car accident and she’s mad I didn’t tell her I race?”

When he puts it like that…I snort, trying to stifle the laughter that emerges as a strange huffing-giggling sound. My gaze flicks to the windows behind him, taking time to compose myself, but returns sooner than meant to, when his large hand cups my cheek, warm and so fucking inviting.

“There she is,” he murmurs. “That right there. Fucking gorgeous, *la mia sirena*. I long to make you laugh again, Ariella. To never stop making you laugh.”

Is he trying to tell me he wants me to be happy? That’s all I’ve ever desired too.

> WHY THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US THEN? YOU DON’T TOUCH ME.

At this point, why not ask everything?

This time, his dark eyes become near-black with his dead expression. He plucks his phone from me and tosses it onto the desk behind us Then his arm bands around my waist and I’m yanked even closer to his chest, until I’m breathless, until there’s no space between my breasts and his chest, when I can see the different shades of brown flecks in his eyes.

My hands have nowhere to go, and like he’s aware, he grabs my wrists and places both my hands over his chest. His heart thumps gently beneath

my right one, while my own heart feels like it's going to vibrate from my body.

"Do you not remember me saying I wouldn't do anything until you tell me to. The last thing I want is to freak you out. I'm a patient man, so whenever you're ready, I will be too."

The frown pulling down my lips serves as my next, silent question, which he somehow reads.

"Disappointed? You wanted me to bring you in here after only a day and fuck you on my desk? Against the window? Take you like a common whore with no penance for your own feelings?"

At least you'd be touching me. I glance at the phone on his desk behind us, longing to have my voice back.

His hands come down heavy onto my thighs and he presses me onto him. Over his cock. Over his—*Oh my god.* My eyes fly to his, my mouth parting in surprise. It's one thing for a man to say it, but it's another for him to prove it.

He's getting hard beneath me, from only me kneeling over him. With my hips in his hands, he rocks me slowly, and I swear he's growing harder. While my core clenches around nothing, my breaths become more tainted with lust.

"Don't think I don't crave you, *sirena*. I do. Every damn night, I lie beside you, hoping that eventually, I'll be granted the honour to taste you. From the moment I agreed to keep you as mine, I vowed not to hurt you further than you've already been. I refuse to be yet another villain in your backstory, but I also don't want to be your hero. I want to witness *you* rise up and save yourself."

I don't know how to save myself.

Erico

Before this marriage, I wasn't entirely sure I had a heart.

Torturing men, listening to their screams and pleas for life, for breath, for even a break in the pain before continuing—none of that ever made me bat an eye.

But Ariella does. My words, the ones encouraging her to control her own fate, came from somewhere, and I'm pretty sure it's the beating organ beneath her palm.

My heart.

I've never been so fucking grateful for it until now, when her eyes get misty and those lips part in surprise. Her breath hikes and the perfect breasts stop rising altogether. Surprised for sure, but the look in her eyes tells me it's a good astonishment. One she's pleased about.

After she stormed in here, looking like the water goddess I didn't realize I needed, everything I've said to her has been the truth. I don't know *how* to be a husband.

When her hand curls into my shirt, right over my heart, her nails scraping the skin there, I'm almost sure she'd only need to do it a single time before finding the sensitive organ. So before she does, I lay the rest of me out for her.

“You think I don’t want you when you became my every fantasy today? You strode in here, no care that you were dripping water everywhere, all to yell at me. Truth is, I *admire* you.” My hand slides up her bare back, her skin so fucking soft, until I finger the ends of her wet hair. “You have fire that you hide from others, and I noticed it the moment we met at Nico’s party, but now I wonder, how many people have gotten the privilege of experiencing it? Because it’s a shame if they haven’t, and I’m considering myself the luckiest motherfucker on the planet to have.

“I knew you were something that day, and then learning you *volunteered* for this marriage just about broke me, Ariella. Mafia wives *become* strong by their husband’s side out of obligation, but when you came to me, you already were. The suspicions you had”—suspicions that not only gutted me but proves I need to do better—“other women may have brushed aside. Ignored it because they believed it was the proper thing to do.” God knows my mother had. “But you didn’t give two fucks. You strode in here and demanded the truth.” My hand on her hip tightens, holding her until there’s no space between us. Her heat drags over my cock, my pants wet from her swimsuit, but if she keeps looking at me how she is, they’ll be wet for a whole other reason. “I appreciate that about you. You dominated the room, commanded the truth, and didn’t hide your true feelings.”

Emotion builds in her eyes, making them somehow larger, but before it overwhelms her, I need her to know the rest of what I want from her. Of what we could *be*.

“I want you to be in control because I get the sense you haven’t had enough of that. First with your stepfather controlling things, and then your sister bringing you into the Corsettis’ lives. And then when I brought you here, but not again. *You* control me. *You* decide what we do.”

Her gaze drops to my lips and instantly, I feel like a winner. This isn’t what I expected when she strode in here: to have her nearly naked in this scrap of a bikini and on the verge of riding my dick, but I certainly refuse to end this now. Not when the craving to push my laptop off my desk so I can lay her back on it and strip the clothing from her body before finally consummating this marriage grows impossibly strong.

But I mean what I told her.

Stroking my thumbs over her cheekbones, I bring her face closer, meeting her halfway. When I speak, our lips are so close, mine tingle with desire.

“Tell me to kiss you. Grant me at least this, Ariella.”

Between my hands, her head rocks lightly, and if that wasn’t enough, she mouths, *Yes*, as her eyes flutter shut and for the first time since our wedding ceremony, I kiss my wife.

I kiss her, but I want her to claim control. To test her and see how far she’ll go. That fire in her gaze, the one threatening to explode, merely needs a spark, and I want this to be it.

My lips move over hers, my tongue tracing her mouth until she opens for me. But the second our tongues meet, *mia sirena* comes to life. She rises up on her knees as my hands fall away from her face and clamp her hips, pinning her over my lap. She cups my cheeks, angling her face, and with that single move, I discover the real version she’s been burying.

She lets out a breathy moan, making my cock jerk beneath us. I long to lay her on my desk and explore her body. First her neck, to discover if it’s sensitive, then her breasts, and finally the heat between her legs. I’ll kiss her there until she grants me permission to taste the rest of her.

But this is all in her control, and finding a woman who enjoys dominating seems so fucking impossible in my role. They all think they need to be submissive to me, not understanding that in the bedroom sometimes, it’s nice to let go.

When she pulls back and ends the kiss with a look I think is almost regrettable, I realize how much I don’t want her to leave this room yet. When she goes, will there be a new understanding between us in which we *try* to make this a proper marriage or will my shitty lack of knowledge take over and throw Ariella back into doubting my desires?

With strength of pure will, I remove my hands from her body, and wrap them over the top of my chair, fingers digging into the fine leather to steady me.

“I won’t touch you until you tell me to, but I want you to explore. I want you to do what *you* want. Command me how you will. You feel me between your legs, and I bet if I were to check, I’d find you soaking.”

Her instant blush tells me I’m correct.

“Which means you’re needy, and I want you to take what your body desires without the worry of me touching you.”

She smiles, and all her previous concerns seem to melt away. I’m no longer staring at the woman I’ve married, rather the person she used to be,

before life brought her down. The woman she's meant to become again, and it's then, I make a silent vow to her.

You will be who you want to be again, Ariella. I'll ensure that much.

Her hands slide from my face to my collarbone where she steadies herself as she rotates her hips, and despite the two layers of clothing between us, I pretend there's none. That my freed cock is sliding between her bare pussy before she takes me into her body.

Hair falls into her face and I long to push it away, but my grip on the leather doesn't allow me to. She's staring down, between our bodies, with an almost curious expression as she rocks her hips. And again. And again until I hear it. Her gentle moan.

"Let me hear you. Don't hide from me."

Her head tilts up until she meets my eyes again and with a wicked grin, she rocks faster. Her fingers work at my shirt, and the moment she uncovers my chest, her hands explore freely. My chair feels very fragile suddenly. We've only just begun and I want to tear it in half to touch her.

I *want* to beg her for permission too, but not yet. First, she'll come like this. That's my single desire for us—to see her become so free and trusting, the orgasm sweeps her.

Does she scream or try to hold it in with a low moan? Does her body go stiff, her muscles uncooperative, or does she ride it out? Reactions I long to discover for myself.

As if it wasn't torture enough, she finishes unbuttoning my shirt all the way to the bottom before lingering around the waistband of my pants. If she undoes my zipper and touches my cock, I'm a fucking goner.

Instead—and thankfully? Regretfully?—her touch is limited to my chest, her hands sliding up and down my stomach, my abs, my chest, while her legs tighten around me. My cock demands more, to feel her orgasm directly.

And it's a fucking sight to behold. She gasps, having brought herself to the edge, and with a look that's almost panicked, almost surprised, she hauls her chest to mine. Her triangle-covered breasts allow me to feel her hard nipples as she steals my mouth again.

My hands grip the seat tighter. Rather it than her because I'm seconds away from breaking my own deal. Her thrusts increase, her whimpers lost in our kiss as her tongue fights mine, a battle for domination she's winning.

"Come, Ariella," I murmur. "Let me see you come."

Not a screamer, but her loud moan, mingled with a kiss immediately plants itself in my head. I'll never stop reliving this second, especially if it's the only moment of us like this.

She pulls back, slyly grinning, which I'm grateful to see. There's no hesitation or regret in her expression as she comes fully down from her orgasm.

My cock isn't pleased with us. It strains beneath her, craving her heat. Her wetness right fucking *there*, separated by my slacks and her bikini bottoms, which hardly constitutes as clothing.

If she were another woman, I'd fuck her right now. Take her on my desk. But lust will not destroy the progress made today. Even if I'm a greedy fucker and my next words come from a place of masochism.

"You're gorgeous. This will live in my head for a long time coming. But I need one more thing from you. Touch yourself. Let me *see* the evidence of what we did."

Her blush returns, but she obeys me, even when, for a second, I doubted she would. She slides her hands between us, into her bikini bottoms, and I curse the science of angles because I'm unable to watch as she strokes herself. She lifts her hand, her middle and index finger gleaming.

"Fuck." And fuck *me* for asking this of her. If fucking my wife wasn't already a dream, I now want to taste her. Want *her* to instruct me to taste her. I'm not sure we're there yet though. My mouth is dry, but I crave the hint of what I hope will eventually occur. It'd be so easy to lean forward and take her fingers in my mouth, but even in this, she's in control.

"Let me taste you, *sirena*, please."

It's been a long time since I've pleaded with a woman. Usually, it's them begging me for release because they think it's what I crave. That because I dominate in life, I need to in the bedroom as well. But they're wrong and finding a woman who understands is challenging.

"Just one taste, so I know. So I have something to dream about until you let me between your legs." *If* she does.

Her eyes narrow playfully and I swear, this woman's making me a mind reader because I can almost hear her denial.

"Ariella, you're going to make me lose my mind." My hands tighten around the chair, the leather squeaking, proving my point.

Her eyes flick to the side in what I think is debate. Minx. But then she brings her fingers toward me and the second she's in reaching distance, I

take her tips between my lips, sucking deeply, tasting her delicious, sweet flavour.

Fuck.

I release the chair and in one, quick movement, have her in my arms as I walk her to the desk, placing her on top for another heated kiss. Her legs wind around my waist, her confidence remaining. She grasps the edges of my shirt until I break the kiss.

She reaches for my phone, quickly types on it, and shows me her question.

> WHAT HAPPENED TO ME BEING IN CONTROL?

I glance from the screen to her, finding eyes sparkling with mischief and a crooked grin, so I know she's not upset.

With my thumb against her bottom lip, unable to stop touching now that I have in the first place, I reply, "Once I tasted your cunt, I had to see you on my desk just once. Kissing you was the safest option. Believe me," I reaffirm, "if today hasn't proved I *do* want you, *sirena,* then I'm fucking up more and more as your husband."

Her gaze flicks to my cock tenting my pants, finally accepting the proof before typing another question.

> I'LL ADMIT, I'M VERY SURPRISED IN WHAT WE DID. AREN'T YOU MAFIA MEN ALL BIG AND BAD AND DOMINANT?

Yet again, she's not avoiding conversation and hiding her curiosity, and I really fucking appreciate that.

"In life, in my role, I take charge. I relish control, enjoy commanding others to do my bidding. In the bedroom, occasionally. But more often what I crave most, is to hand over control to someone else. To *you.*" I cup her cheek, tipping her head back so no part of her expression is hidden from me. "I enjoy both roles, but you…from the beginning, I sensed you also relishing the power. Once freed from the bounds keeping you down, you'd shine, and trust me, you have today."

She bites her bottom lip, and I rub my thumb over it again, trying to free it from her teeth. She spends a long time writing on my phone before revealing her message.

BEFORE THE ACCIDENT, WHEN I WAS A NORMAL GIRL, I HATED WHEN MY EX-BOYFRIEND TRIED TO PIN ME TO THE BED. HE'D WRAP HIS HAND AROUND MY NECK, TRY TO TELL ME TO "TAKE HIM," TO "ENJOY IT." WHEN I TRIED TO BE ON TOP, HE ALWAYS FLIPPED US OVER, TOLD ME HE WAS IN CHARGE. AFTER HIM, I ASSUMED NO GUYS LIKED ME BEING IN CONTROL SO I STOPPED TRYING AND DID WHATEVER THEY WANTED.

She might not realize it, but she just sentenced a man to death. With a mental note, my men will scour her past until finding the fucker who made her feel less. Even back then, she wasn't her true self—wasn't *able* to be herself.

That changes now.

I don't realize I'm seething until she touches my arm, her head tilting in question. My jaw unlocks, and I tuck away the revenge for now, focusing on only her.

"That's the difference between a *kid* and a *man*. A kid thinks they need to be in control of their partner. A man knows what he wants, but more importantly, he understands his partner's desires, and interactions become what *both* need."

Beneath my thumb, her lips fall open, and I tease the edge of her mouth, imagining how she'd look with my cock there instead. One day, hopefully. If she sucks as well as she kisses, my control will be less than nothing.

"For now, we need to get you hydrated."

Without further warning, I scoop her up. She gasps lightly, scrambling in my hold until her arms lock around my neck, her legs at my side. My hand selfishly holds her ass to keep her steady as I ensure she has my phone until we find hers.

I walk her straight down the hallway, past her music room, which I've slowly been outfitting for her needs, by the main sitting area with the huge wall of windows and fish tank, and into the kitchen. It's empty, thankfully, because after our experience, I'm not ready to share Ariella with anyone else.

I plop her onto the island counter, hearing her hiss as the cool temperature touches her bare skin. I fill a glass with cold, filtered water from the fridge and hand it to her.

With a small smile, she sips, barely swallowing any of the water before she's typing her next message on my phone.

THERE WAS TWO THINGS I WENT INTO YOUR OFFICE TO TALK ABOUT. TO YELL AT YOU ABOUT THE SUPPOSED MISTRESS AND ABOUT JACK.

Jack Scuttle who is happily married and loyal as hell to his wife.

WHY DID YOU FIRE SEBASTIAN?

A question not asked with curiosity but with an anger I relish in seeing. Spark. Match. Light. And…flames.

“I didn’t. He’s been reassigned. He’s a damn good soldier, and I’m not losing him.”

She pouts, which would look cute if it wasn’t for the antagonism blasting through slitted eyes. Fingers typing faster than before, she writes:

HE WAS BECOMING MY FRIEND. HE KNOWS SIGN LANGUAGE. IT FELT NICE TO TALK WITHOUT PAPER OR PHONES.

Which is the exact reason I’m working with him, but until I can hold a semi-decent conversation, I’m not admitting it to her.

“Your bodyguard shouldn’t be your friend. He was looking at you in ways I didn’t enjoy, *wife*.” I step between her legs, caging her in with my arms. She doesn’t bend backwards though, doesn’t play into my strength, but rather leans closer with her own before typing her long response.

IT WASN’T LIKE THAT AND YOU KNOW IT. I WOULDN’T DO THAT. HE WAS FRIENDLY WHILE YOU LEFT ME ALONE IN THIS LARGE HOUSE WITH NOTHING TO DO. HE’S THE ONE WHO SHOWED ME AROUND, GAVE ME COMPANY, MADE ME FEEL LESS ALONE. THEN I LEARNED HE KNEW SIGN LANGUAGE AND IT WAS TOO PERFECT. YOU HANDED ME A FRIEND WHICH YOU’VE NOW REPLACED AND I DON’T LIKE THAT.

Christ, she really knows how to stick it to a man. In that long message, my mind changes two different times. First, to obey her wishes and grant Sebastian to be by her side again, and then to keep the change I’ve put in place.

“Abandoning you the first day is a regret I’ll live with for the rest of our lives,” I admit. “But I’m not changing my mind on this.”

She frowns, causing my chest to split.

“But,” I start with a sigh, “you’ll likely see him around the mansion. At events and such when we need guards. For you, I’ll ensure he’ll always be assigned those tasks so you’ll have opportunities to see him.”

She returns to the phone, beaming, with a final message:

WHAT WAS JACK TALKING ABOUT WHEN HE MENTIONED TRAVELLING WITH US TOMORROW?

Ariella

I ’m going home.

Well, I suppose I’m *leaving* home—my new home. And heading toward my old one—the one I’ve known my entire life. Where Mom and Della and my childhood memories reside.

I don’t know what’s home anymore. What is and isn’t, but what I do, is I get to see my sister again.

The moment Montreal’s skyline comes into view, sitting becomes nearly impossible, if it wasn’t already, considering I managed the entire flight with Erico pretending not to be watching me. But I felt him continuously glancing from his laptop to me.

Random games on my phone kept me entertained for the flight, and I wrote a bit in my music journal, which I brought with me. Knowing the day laid out in front of me—the day I haven’t allowed myself to process yet—I may need a space to write about loss.

The pilot’s voice comes over the small speaker, announcing we’re landing within minutes, as the plane takes a sharp swoop and angles itself down to the ground.

“You’ll be okay.”

Erico’s statement drags my attention from the windows toward him, watching as he shuts his laptop and tucks it to the side. There wasn’t a

question in it; no, “are you okay?” Just a blatant fact, like he knows I will be.

He can’t know for certain though. Not when even *I* don’t.

After yesterday, Erico’s been looking at me a lot more often, and if he was anyone else, I’d think it creepy. We didn’t kiss again after his office, or touch in any way, but the memory of his mouth against mine, of riding his hard body, filled my mind, my dreams, making sleep nearly impossible. A few times, I debated rolling into him, kissing him, exploring his body and granting him the permission to touch me, but I ended the fantasy before it began when the uncertainty took hold again.

Still, no regrets storming into his office yesterday. What do they say about relationships? Open communication is best. Guess that’s a fact.

When I finally passed out, I was woken only hours later by the most vivid dream I’ve had all week. This wasn’t a surprise though, and even without Erico mentioning the trip to Montreal, I’d still recall precisely what day it is, based on the dream alone. Every year, like clockwork, it infiltrates my mind. In the days and weeks leading up to the anniversary, it’s flashes. But the night before, it’s *everything*. Every heartbreaking second, every hellish moment of that traumatizing experience.

I hate it.

Hate Mom.

Hate myself.

Hate Stefano.

But appreciate Erico more than words can say because my heart was nearly ripped open when he revealed gaining permission from Nico to take me to Mom’s gravesite. Something I’d never done yet; something, I didn’t even do when living with Della, but Erico’s making it possible.

The plane takes another sharp turn and angles its nose up as it descends to the ground, landing with a thud and speeding to a slowing roll and eventually a stop altogether. Through the window at Erico’s back, I spot us parking beside the Corsetti plane, which is indicative by the plain white body and single black stripe on the wing.

Jack, who was seated toward the front of the plane, stands and assists the pilot in opening the door. Erico offers me his hand, which I give him, using his strength more than I thought I’d need to get me up.

He wraps an arm around my waist and hauls me to the open door, where the late morning sun is streaming through. I’m thankful for yesterday for an

entire other reason now. How would today go with my walls still strongly erected, without letting him support me?

Erico walks down the metal steps first, his fingers still linked with mine as I officially re-enter my home city as an *other*. The rules are different. I'm technically wed to an ex-enemy of the city's crime lord. There's protocols in place that even I must follow. The first being, getting into the car Nico sent for us, as he is now in control of how I go about my own city.

Once my feet touch the tarmac, Erico releases me. Immediately, I reach for him, but he steps out of the way just as a body barrels into me, staggering me back two steps as I fight for balance. Blonde hair fills my mouth as my older sister yanks me into a tight hug.

"*God*, you have no idea how much I miss you, Ariella. Life isn't the same without you around."

Except she doesn't need me. She's found a new family. Nico's parents respect her, and Aurora can be a replacement sister, plus she has one of our ex-stepsisters, Rozelyn, here. Even Rafael, Nico's younger brother, can be another sibling to her. He has the younger brother annoying energy vibe, so it works.

Della releases me from her hug to study my face in her usual manner with her eyes sliding into slits. Not sure what—if—she spots anything, but it has her quickly throwing a glare toward Erico, who's standing beside Nico and a black town car. Probably the same one I've driven in numerous times.

She whispers, "Are you okay?"

"Yes." I think…better than okay. At least, I'm getting there.

"You better be telling me the truth. If he's doing *anything* you don't like, let me know. I'll get Nico on it."

With a meaningful look involving a sad smile, I remind her, "You know as well as I do, that's not how this works. Erico could be beating me to near-death every night and Nico's hands would be tied."

The example was meant to be the extreme, and her cheeks go paler than normal. "Maybe so, but I'd send him to war over you, Ariella, and you know I fucking would."

She would, which is the issue. "He's treating me well, Della. Don't worry."

The next look she gives is for Erico rather than me. A warning one as we approach him and Nico.

Nico tips his head toward me. “Mrs. Rossi, I hope you’re enjoying your new home.”

Della reacts the same time I do—with a small squeak. It’s the reminder I’m no longer his sister-in-law. Well, I’m not *only* his sister-in-law now; I’m the wife of an ally.

I smile my greeting, which he accepts, stepping aside to gesture for Della and I to climb into the car. As I follow my sister into the vehicle, Nico points for Jack to sit up front with the driver. In the car, Della takes my hand into both of hers and angles herself into me, purposely keeping the men away. Based on the look she gives Erico after he sits beside Nico, she’s still blaming him for taking me away.

Patting the back of her hand, I shake my head, silently telling her to stop being mean. *It’s fine*, I mouth to her right as the car starts moving.

We leave the airfield and drive straight into the city. The trip is silent. Della leaning into me while the men work on their phones. With every building, every vehicle, every highway exit we pass, the reality of this trip becomes more obvious. Less ignorable. I’m not visiting my sister. We’re visiting our mother. Our *dead* mother.

Hold it in, hold it in, hold it in.

I don’t know how I’ll manage.

When the driver pulls in front of the cemetery, my first thought is how lovely it is. The late summer breeze knocks through the trees surrounding the block’s worth of property. The grey stones in the middle of the wrought-iron fence seem fitting, like it’s appropriate they have such a pretty piece of land to call home. At least Stefano did this much—gave Mom a decent resting place.

Nico gets out of the car first, followed by Erico. Della releases me to exit behind them, and then it’s my turn.

I feel stuck.

Weighted.

Grey clouds creep up, despite the hot sun beaming through the windows, flashing onto the black sundress I found in our closet. Almost like Erico had it purchased for this day specifically, like he somehow knew.

Erico’s face appears in the car’s opening, his hand stretching toward me. He says nothing. Doesn’t ask me to exit the vehicle. Doesn’t reassure me in anyway. But he’s *here*, and that’s what I need.

He knows it too.

Somehow. Reading me. All my walls being more and more fragile with every passing moment with this man.

I lay my palm in his and allow him to take me from the vehicle's safety and toward facing the pain buried within the pretty cemetery. The rocky ground of the surrounding patch of grass digs into the foam of my Toms shoes, the pain echoing the one in my heart.

He drops my hand but not before whispering in my ear, "Sometimes even the strongest of us need a little help now and again."

Della steps between us in a not-so-subtle way to loop her arm through mine then leads me down the cement path. Erico mentioned Nico sourcing the exact gravesite where Mom's buried and must have provided Della the directions because she walks us right toward it without hesitation.

Right down the stone path with gravestones on either side of us. All those dead people, with families still out there. Or maybe not, as we pass one with a 1762 date on it. Perhaps their family line died off, perhaps not. So many stories within this property and Mom's become yet another one.

Della stops and pulls me down a particular row, passing stones of every size until reaching the final one. Small, grey, newer than some of the others. Only a couple years old. The inscription drops me to the ground, my bare knees slamming into the cool, trimmed grass.

Valerie Lambert

1978—2020

Beloved wife & mother

Memories immediately bombard me.

I scream.

The same kind of scream from that day. The warning, the fear, the anger of not being listened to. The same scream I later released when I awoke in the hospital, confused, frazzled, with the final word I'd spoken to her echoing in my head, taunting me with its evil sorrow.

She didn't listen to me then, so what was the point in talking at all? People only pay attention to what they want to. If Mom had, then she'd be alive.

I fall forward, onto my hands, gripping the grass at the base of the stone—*her* stone. It's not right she even has a stone. That this is what her life became. Her two orphaned daughters—because our birth father may as well have died, for all we know—sobbing at her fucking gravesite because she married the wrong man.

Della's arms come around me as I scream and sob and let it all go into the grass. As I release the torturing pain, the endless rage, and the shattered grief into the ground. The grass, the dirt, and the roots beneath me carry my silent message toward the urn of Mom's ashes.

Am I even still screaming? I have no idea anymore. Nothing makes a difference.

It didn't then.

Mom getting a call to head to the library, where she occasionally volunteers, is strange, since they typically work around her schedule and not the other way around. Mom being Mom agreed regardless since she had no other plans.

Then her driver wasn't available. Her driver is always *available. He was hired by Stefano* for her. *It makes no sense he'd be elsewhere.*

Which is how I find myself seated inside the passenger seat of one of Stefano's smaller, spare cars. How many does one person need? This is number three, I think.

"Something about today feels off, Mom," I tell her, eyes cutting to the side where she's driving.

My mother shrugs and smiles, too caught up in bliss to look deeper beneath the surface. Since the moment Stefano came into our lives, the dark clouds that often consume me have been more present. Less ignorable. Everything good comes to an end and I'm waiting for this to as well.

I've been living with depression for years at this point, but every side-eye Stefano shoots my way, or bitchy comment from Yasmine or Rozelyn, his two daughters, makes the black hole a few feet deeper, demanding I jump in and hide myself from them.

"You worry too much, honey." Reaching over and effectively ending this conversation, she twists the knob and turns up the volume of the 80s music blasting through the speakers. It makes my head hurt.

After another block, the feeling doesn't go away. Above us, a grey cloud covers the sun—like a warning. Mom slows the vehicle down at a red light before stopping it altogether and she drags her fingers along the wheel, awaiting the green. Since marrying Stefano, she hasn't driven herself anywhere, so maybe she's simply missed the freedom. That's what I try to convince myself of anyway.

Glancing away from her, I rest my head on the backrest and I stare out the side window as a car is coming to a stop behind us.

But instead of slowing, it's maintaining its speed. It's coming too close for a safe stop. I don't know how to drive, but even I can distinguish that. It's basic math.

"Mom." I reach over, turning the music down. "Mom, I think someone's about to hit us."

Closer…The vehicle is white. A van. I can't make out the driver due to the angles. Still not slowing…

"Mom!"

"Ariella, you're being sil—"

Crash!

Metal scraping against metal.

Tires squealing.

Mom screaming.

Control robbed.

Our car being shoved into oncoming traffic—

Honking. So many honks…

Crash!

"Mom!"

The last spark are her eyes. Blue like mine and Della's.

An apology within them.

A final message: I love you.

The flash of headlights beyond her shoulder. When they turn off, her eyes shut, and my body slams forward, head smashing against the front dash.

And then…it's over.

Erico

Her scream is what I'll hear in my dreams every night until my soul exits this world.

Guttural, tortured—a yell—a howl—a plea from a girl to her mother.

Ariella drops forward, sobbing into the grass at their mother's gravestone as Della hugs her from the side.

I step forward, needing to hold her myself, to care for her, but am quickly blocked by Nico's arm. Without looking away from the sisters, he shakes his head and murmurs, "Leave them. They need this. They deserve to be alone."

At first, I snarl and am about to shove him away, but then, when after a long minute she lifts herself from the grass and falls into her sister's arms, I realize he's right.

"Believe me, this is extremely difficult for me to watch too. I'd like nothing more than to go hold Della and reassure her she's okay, but for now, there's someone else she needs more, and I can accept that." Dropping his arm, he tips his head to the side. "Come, let's walk and leave them be."

I hesitate, glancing back to ensure Jack and Nico's driver are still standing by the cemetery's entrance. Satisfied no one's getting by them, I follow Nico, shoving my hands inside my slacks after a final look to Ariella.

“Originally, we mentioned an annual trip on the anniversary,” Nico starts, “but if there’s a time she really needs to visit, when the grief is hitting harder, just message. Let’s be honest, both of them lost a mother that day, but Ariella was affected most.”

“You’re not half-bad, Corsetti, despite what my father says about you.” At the very least, he cares so much for his family, including his extended family.

He chuckles. “Yes, I’m sure your father’s descriptions of me are colourful. Either way, I’m pleased that we’ve found this common ground.”

I glance toward Ariella and Della—the common ground they’ve each become for two past enemies. “I agree.”

Nico follows my gaze and smirks, slapping his hand on my shoulder. “It’s the Lambert way. Those women wrap a man around their finger like no tomorrow. Can I assume, all is going well between you two?”

“Yes,” I answer carefully, unwilling to offer any details about Ariella and my relationship. When he doesn’t probe, I use the opening to ask what’s been nagging me the entire trip up here. “When we first met about Ariella, you mentioned the accident that took their mother from them. Said it was their stepfather; the same man you called for my assistance on.”

Nico makes a noise, indicating he’s listening and waiting for my point.

“I doubt De Falco would have been driving the vehicle himself. Who caused the accident?”

Nico stops walking entirely, scanning the trees around us before returning his attention to me. “After meeting Della, I had Rafael, my brother, look into it. The accident was deemed precisely that, but I felt there was more to it. Despite the research, nothing concrete was dug up. De Falco’s recent confession confirmed what we all suspected. Other recent events had us learning that he was using a group of mercenaries to do his dirty work. While the ones we found are all dead, I can forward you everything we have on them and the files about the accident, as well as Rafael’s number, since he had more dealings with the group’s leader than I did. Maybe you can dig something else up because you’re correct. De Falco only ordered the hit, which means someone else was driving that vehicle. Since their mother was the only victim in the accident, the fucker must have escaped.”

“Appreciate it.” I step, encouraging us to walk again.

He follows. “If he’s alive and you find him, I’d be grateful for a piece of him.”

“He’s mine. All fucking mine, Corsetti. For her.”

“Hm.” His tone is light, amused, but I’m not laughing whatsoever. “I’ll get you the information then.” Even as he speaks, he roots for his phone to shoot off a text, likely to his brother.

We reach the end of the stone path and the other end of the cemetery, so we turn around, slowly walking back the way we came.

“Enamoured with her?” He nods toward the sisters, like I couldn’t decipher who he’s asking about.

I shrug. Not his business.

“Less pissed about the switch in brides then?”

“I was never angry,” I counter. “Besides, shit works out like this for a reason. How’s Aurora?”

“Happy with her chosen man.”

“Good.”

Eventually, we get near enough to make out both Ariella and Della talking. I wonder if they’re talking to one another or their mother. Despite the day, I’m selfish enough to be jealous of her family for getting to hear her voice.

Like Nico is thinking the same, he asks, “She talk to you yet?”

“No.”

“You sound a little bitter.” He’s chuckling again, sharpening the annoyance in my nerves with every sound. If he was anyone else, I’d have my gun drawn to shut him up. “It’ll happen,” he continues. “She’s gone through a lot, but I’m sure in time, she’ll open up. Today’s bound to earn some brownie points.”

Nodding, I agree, but *brownie points* isn’t what I want. Using her mother’s death and this visit isn’t a tool to bring us closer together.

Once we near the row they’re in, we stop walking, remaining on the path. The sun’s high in the sky, taunting the sisters with its life, its warmth. We’ll stay here until dusk, nighttime, midnight, for all I care. However long Ariella needs.

After a few more minutes, Ariella reaches into the bosom of her dress and pulls out a rolled-up piece of paper. She unwraps it, shows her sister, and then refolds it before sinking her fingers into the base of their mother’s headstone. She scrapes a tiny pile out, uncaring as the dirt wedges itself

beneath her nails, and creates a small hole, no larger than a chipmunk would need to bury an acorn. The paper flutters into the hole before Ariella pushes her dirt pile overtop and presses her body's weight down, ensuring the dirt remains packed tightly before lifting to her feet, Della beside her.

Nico takes a step, assuming they're done, but stops when the sisters don't move. They link hands and continue staring at the stone. Becoming statues exactly like so many around us.

It's another few minutes before they turn away. Della throws herself right into Nico's arms while Ariella stops in front of me, her gaze locked on her dirt-stained fingertips, fiddling with them.

My arms ache to hold her, embrace her like Della and Nico are, and prove she can rely on me for the emotional moments. I reach for her the same time she does me. Her arms wrap my chest, her head resting over my heart. Her face is stained with tears, which she rubs into my shirt. Minutes pass and her hold grows tighter and tighter.

I love that she wanted my support, though. That she trusts me enough to at the very least hold her, care for her during the tough moments. I rub up and down her back, easing her with every method possible. For as long as she needs.

Over her head, I catch Della observing from Nico's arms. He's murmuring something in her ear that she's slowly nodding to.

"Whenever you need to visit her, you let me know, okay? I'll make it happen with Nico."

After another moment, she lifts her head from my chest, revealing fresh tears. I wipe them away with my thumb, as she manages a soft smile.

Thanks, she mouths before pulling out of my hold entirely and returning to her sister's side. They link hands and begin walking from the cemetery, Nico and me following close behind.

~

Nico offers to host us for dinner, but Ariella shakes her head, denying his request, so we head back to the airfield. After a long goodbye with Della, she climbs the stairs into our plane, her shoulders lower than earlier. I wait until she's inside the plane before shaking hands with Nico.

"Thanks for this."

“Thank you,” he replies, releasing me so I can go.

Della blocks my next step. Her gaze darts to the plane’s windows and back, her teeth sawing on her bottom lip. “Give her time. She’ll be okay. She admitted reliving the entire accident when she saw the grave.”

“Got it.” *To relive such a thing*. “Did she describe what happened?” How horrible was it for her to re-experience that?

Della shakes her head. “It’s one thing we never spoke about, even years ago, and honestly,” her expression pinches before she blinks into the sun above, “I don’t want to know.”

After a final goodbye, I take the metal steps two at a time. Jack follows behind and begins assisting the pilot for takeoff, while I seek out my wife, who isn’t on the couches. The door to the small bedroom at the back is shut, and without knocking, I enter, finding her curled tightly in the centre of the bed. Her eyes are clamped shut.

Sitting on the edge, I stroke the back of one of her hands. Her eyes open, finding me instantly. “You’ll get through this, Ariella, even if it feels like you won’t. You have in the past, and you will this time because you’re so fucking strong.”

She nods but I wonder how much she actually heard me. Giving her hand a final pet, I stand to leave her when her hand darts out for mine, delicate fingers wrapping my wrist. The metal of her ring grounds me, lowering me back to her side.

Stay. Please, she mouths, and shifts to make room.

Like I could deny her anything. I slip into the bed beside her, barely in position before she’s rolling over and burying her head in my chest. Another day, I’d relish holding her like this, but this feels different.

Because the moment I wrap my arm around her waist, she grasps my shirt and sobs burst from her heart again.

“Cry it out, Ariella. I have you. Thank you for trusting me enough to be this vulnerable.”

Ariella

The next day, my emotional walls erect again.

Grief is a funny thing and I've gone months without being sad about Mom. Without her being more than a passing thought. Yesterday was *hard*. Almost as hard as when I first woke in the hospital to find Della clutching my hand before delivering the heart-shattering news. Nothing made sense then, and I relived it all yesterday.

Mom's entire life has been subjected to a cemetery for the remainder of her time on Earth.

Growing up, life wasn't the easiest. Mom worked two jobs to ensure Della and I were cared for and had what we needed to get by. After Della graduated from high school, she also got a full-time job, to contribute to the household. Then Mom met Stefano, and while she's never admitted it, I believe his money was some of the appeal.

Do I think she truly loved him? Yes. Mom was very strong-minded, so marrying a man she didn't care for isn't something she would do. But knowing the man she was coming to like would also prevent her from crying over past-due bills at one in the morning might have been a driving force behind the speed of their relationship.

Unwittingly, Della and I followed in her footsteps. Each of us wed to the head of a mafia family. Each of us with new paths, that somehow, I feel

Mom would be proud of.

Which is why, after I cried out every drop of liquid in my body yesterday, my grief slipped into the corners of my mind once more, and by the time I open my eyes the day after, waking alone in bed, I feel *okay*.

Erico's already gone for the day, but he warned me he would be. Said he had to run into the city for a few things and would return in the late afternoon. Even through my tears, I smiled when he told me. It felt *normal* for a husband to have these conversations with his wife. We might not be the meet-cute I once dreamed of, or even the happily-ever-after, but we're headed in the right direction, I think.

Dressing for breakfast, I laugh to myself. I feel fucking *good*. After yesterday, and even the day before, my depression has faded. Not gone—never gone. This diagnosis is stuck with me, and I it. Any little deep emotion will bring it to surface, but for now, I'm more confident. Happy. *Right.*

Not like I'm a burden. Not like Erico's only here to fuck me, impregnate me, and abandon me to this empty life.

"You're happy today," Carlotta greets me when I all but skip into the kitchen. She takes in my pale, pink sundress with a grin. "You look good too—not that you don't always. I just assumed, after yesterday—I'm sorry, Mrs. Rossi. Coffee?"

I nod and take my seat at the island as she prepares the mug. She assumed I'd be locked away in bed after yesterday. I debated it too. So easy to let myself get sucked beneath the wave of emotions and forget about life. But I *want* to write and play my music today. I *want* to spend time with my husband later —while he's still interested.

The thing I *don't* want to do is attend the party his mother's throwing tonight. Erico insisted on getting her to move it to next week, considering our day yesterday, but I waved the offer off. Mom wouldn't want me to live in darkness my entire life. She'd want me to embrace this party and prove to the entire *Famiglia* I'm a force to be reckoned with. So it's with her in my memory, I mentally prepare for tonight.

Even if that feels damn near impossible.

I take the mug from Carlotta and after a wave goodbye, head for my music room. There, I find another addition to the room—a huge decorative rug in the centre that takes up much of the floor. The carpet is a deep

emerald green, and in the centre, a black outline of a mermaid. A siren. *Sirena.*

Funny man.

Careful to skirt the edges of it, not wanting to accidentally spill coffee on the beautiful design, I head for my piano.

Hours later, the door opens, and while I immediately know who's entering, my fingers don't break their pace with the piano's keys. Being only a few notes from the song's end, he'll have to wait. My ears perk, listening for his steps, which I expect to be directed toward the couches, but instead, they're growing louder as he approaches.

"Bella, mia sirena."

His fingers sweep aside my hair, brushing along the base of my neck as the song comes to a lulling close, my fingers sliding from the piano keys to turn around and face him, smiling.

His dark hair is more messy than usual, a contrast to his neatly-pressed suit. For once, in my dress, we match.

The light feeling from earlier returns like a force in my stomach. At some point, he's bound to realize he's fucked up in wanting to treat this as an actual marriage and he'll break my spirit when he pushes me away again. Because everything good in life always comes to an end, so until then, I'll capitalize on this.

His thumb strokes my cheek, right by my mouth and I turn into his touch, a low, contented moan working up my throat. "Fuck, Ariella, a man can get used to a greeting like this."

Except a better greeting would be for your wife to speak to you. To ask how work was.

No, stop! The negative voice will not win this time.

He bends, dropping to his knees in front of me, which puts his face in line with mine. My only warning: "Stop me now if you don't want this."

I lean forward the same time he does to meet his kiss. His hands come around my back and he hauls me closer to the edge of the seat, fitting himself between my legs as he cups the back of my neck. It's then I realize our positioning. My clothing. My legs that are spread open.

Touch me. I think I'm ready for this—for him. For how much? Not sure. But for more than faraway stares and cautious looks.

I grab strands of his hair by his neck, kissing him back as roughly as he's kissing me. He makes a sound of appreciation, his interest of my domination emerging.

Dominant. Never would have coined that to myself, but it makes complete sense.

His noises encourage me, makes me feel like I'm doing this correctly. I take one of his hands and rest it over my right breast.

Erico breaks the kiss, a question flickering in his dark, smoky eyes, even as his hand flexes around my mound of flesh. A low moan threatens to come forth, my nipple budding beneath my thinly padded bra.

"Giving me permission to touch, *sirena*? If you are, you'll have to tell me when to stop because I have a fucking craving for my wife that needs to be satiated."

For *me*.

Controlling his wrist, I drag his hand down my chest, my stomach, toward my hips while my legs slide farther apart. A silent instruction for him to touch.

"Let me taste you, Ariella. The other day has me dying for more."

Does he mean—here? The floor, or that brand new carpet, or the couch?

Either way, I nod, and gift him my control with a simple arch of my back. His other hand comes down on my thigh, large and warm, as he caresses up and down my leg, inching closer to my core with each pass.

Until suddenly, he grips me beneath my ass and stands, lifting me with him. A surprised noise spurts from my lips as he carries me to the side of the piano and rests me on the cool, smooth surface before moving the mug and coaster to the floor.

"You're still in charge. You don't like something, end it with two taps to the back of my head."

The back of his—?

His hands drag up my legs again until his fingers hook in my panties, and he pulls them off before tossing them to the side. His eyes remain locked on mine the entire time, testing, pleading for me to not end this.

I don't think I could if I wanted to.

After the other night, after the dream, I incorrectly began second-guessing us. Perhaps he was finished with me. Maybe he missed being in

control. So many doubts that were clearly me being me. He's not ending this. He wants it. Me. *Us.*

He smooths his hand over the piano top by my hip. "You know, when I purchased this, a fantasy to take you on the surface came to life."

His fingers trail over my thigh and toward my centre. He pauses there, eyes on mine, before sliding two fingers through my wet slit. My body opens for him, my legs falling wide, as my silent cry fills the room.

"Wet already and I've barely touched you. This is how I know this marriage is meant to be. We're made for one another, *sirena*."

I'd like to believe that statement, even if he's only saying it from a place of passion.

With my heels digging into the hard surface, I lift my hips and arch my back, chasing his touch, pushing his fingers over my clit. With an arched brow, I challenge him.

Touch me how we both want you to.

"So good at giving commands," he croons. "You know exactly what you crave, like a perfect, little queen." His hand stops, his index finger poised at my opening and my breathing stalls, seconds away from rocking my hips and taking him into my body myself. "*My* fucking queen, Ariella. All mine."

With that statement, his finger sinks inside me, curling and immediately finding the place I'm most sensitive. He strokes the spot roughly, somehow *knowing* what I enjoy. Not to be treated like a princess, not in this, but rather, a queen. My head thumps back onto the piano, unable to watch any longer as pleasure tightens my eyes together, my mind focusing on only one thing: the spark igniting within me.

His finger slips out only to add another, stretching me slightly as he re-enters. My cry isn't silent this time, my moan low, and I punch the top of the piano as my orgasm very quickly rises to the top, unable to be tapered after so many years of being untouched.

"Command me, Ariella. What do you need from me?"

Everything.

But his previous words about tasting me echoes in my head again, so I reach my hand into his hair, snagging a clump of his hair as I urge his face between my thighs.

"That's exactly what I was hoping for."

His head lowers beneath my strength, not that I think he needs further encouragement, and his tongue swipes up my centre before nipping my clit between his teeth. He bites down lightly at the same time his fingers pulse against the spot inside me again.

And that's it for me.

I chase the instant high, heels digging into the piano as I rock on his tongue, fucking his fingers in and out of my pussy roughly. He doesn't stop me, doesn't pin me down, just allows me the control to feel my orgasm how I need to. My hand presses as heavy as I can onto the back of his head, ensuring he doesn't think to abandon me now of all times.

When the pulsing inside my core slows, and my breathing evens out, my hand sliding limp from his hair, he lifts his head, but not before gently biting the inside of my thigh. "Hottest fucking thing in my life." His fingers gently pull from me and he reaches up with his other hand, flicking off stray strands of my hair from my face. "How will I ever be able to stop touching you, *sirena*?"

You don't, that's how.

Once my hair is off my face, his hand drops to the edge of my dress, to tug it down, baring my nipples one by one. Cool air greets them, making them tighter than they already were.

"These deserve to be worshipped and I'm glad to be the one who gets to." He lightly tugs on each nipple, my core pulsating in tandem with his touch before sucking them each in his mouth. His teeth scrape the sensitive skin of both before kissing his way down my body, right back to my core.

My legs fall open again and his hands press down, holding me steady at the precise second his mouth covers me. Without his fingers accompanying his licks, this feels different. Less pressure and more easing, almost. His tongue drags slowly over my core, teasing my clit, my opening, but that won't do. I grip his hair again, reclaiming control of his movements as I slowly rock my hips, creating a pace I'll orgasm to.

He chuckles darkly, right into my pussy, the sound embedding into the deepest parts of me right before his tongue chases it. He fucks me with it, like he had with his fingers, and his eyes flash up, meeting mine. This is the memory that'll live forever, seeing his tongue inside me, his hands massaging my flesh, and his eyes begging me to become his in another way.

A second orgasm hits me like a freight train. But more so, it's very… *wet.*

Oh, my god, I'm not…

But I can't stop it. With a moan and a final thrust, liquid gushes from my pulsing pussy, wetter than I've ever been, creating a mess I genuinely didn't know I'd be capable of. I've *never* orgasmed like that before.

Erico's licks turn to slurps as he cleans me, and my body slumps onto the piano, muscles limp and useless. But then a deep-sated curiosity to witness the mess I've created has me lifting my head, studying between my legs. It's all over my piano, and him. He's completely soaked with *me*.

While I'm downright mortified, Erico wipes the back of his mouth with his sleeve and chuckles. "I take back my earlier statement. *That* was the fucking hottest thing."

I gesture to the space between me and the piano, the mess, hoping he understands the urgency.

He does but a strange look enters his eyes and he lowers his arm slowly, almost in awe. "You've never squirted before, have you?" When I shake my head, he curses. "I can see why this would be alarming to you then. Well, let me ease you—" He reaches for my hips, somehow managing to lift me over most of the mess and off the piano. Once on my feet, he cups my face, staring into my eyes until I believe his next statement. "You are a goddamn dream come true, Ariella. A dream I didn't even know I had. Now come," he drops his hands to take mine, "let's get you cleaned up."

I follow him out of the room, but a quick peek back at the piano has me yanking on his arm to pull him to a stop. That's twice now I've come and I still haven't seen him undressed. Felt him between my legs, sure, but not beyond that.

Stealing my hand from his, I quickly grab my phone from its location on the piano bench, shooting him a text as I walk back to his side.

ME

What about you?

He smirks, looking up from his phone after reading the text. "Believe me, that *was* for me."

Erico

Caladin drops his feet from my desk after I basically shove them off. He'd come here earlier this evening, figuring the drive from here to the country club is closer and with the news he had to share, it was simpler. For him anyway, as that's what he's claiming.

The event's at a country club owned by the *Famiglia*, one of our legal businesses purchased at the demand of my mother. She claims the beachfront property is the ideal location for celebrations such as tonight, and since most of the guests are flying in from other parts of the country anyway, she's not concerned with a convenient location.

"Anything on Evan Brown?" Ariella's ex-boyfriend's name is laughably simplistic. Like his parents despised him. It was easy enough to find her school records, her graduating class, and from there, anyone she had previous ongoing conversations with.

Caladin rolls his eyes. "Yeah but not until you explain why I had guys searching for him. He was her *high school* boyfriend. Dude, that was how many years ago? Obsessive much."

I level my glare at him. "Just answer my question."

"Answer mine." After a long stare from us both, he rolls his eyes again and concedes. "Whatever. Yeah, we found him, but he won't be any help to you. In the couple years after high school, he was picked up for dealing a

couple times. No charges really stuck for too long. Seemed a lot of community service or week-long stints in jail. One day, neighbour called something in, and he was found OD'd in his bed. Guy's dead."

"Well, isn't that a shame." In truth, I'd have enjoyed doing him in myself, but if he's no longer breathing, then that's good enough for me. Saves me from taking time away from Ariella to kill his unfit ass.

"Gonna now admit what he did to warrant you hunting him?"

"When they were dating, he hurt her in a manner of speaking. Wasn't great with her." It's one thing to not appreciate a woman's dominate nature, like he obviously hadn't with Ariella, but it's another to force her to the bed by her throat and take it how *he* wants.

"Well, shit." Caladin whistles. "I take it all back then. I get why you wanted him found then."

Glancing at the time on my phone, Ariella's bound to be nearly ready, so I lead him from my office and down the hallway toward the entranceway to wait for her.

My cousin skips behind me. "Hey, nice job on the races, by the way. Three back-to-back wins. Damn, I bet two out three on you, but all three!"

I sharply turn so the dick almost runs into me. "You bet I'd only win twice? Asshole. You deserve that loss."

My voice must have carried to upstairs because a flash of colour enters my peripheral vision and there she is, standing at the top, making Caladin's comment matter less. So much, he's no longer a thought on my mind.

Nothing is a thought on my mind. Nothing but the vision walking toward me.

Donned in a slim, shimmering, purple dress that catches in the overhead crystal's lighting, it garners all my attention. It's held up by two thin straps that lay on each shoulder, and the top is cut into a V, highlighting the slight swell of her breasts, alongside the diamond necklace. The dress falls right to the floor, the peep of silver heels preventing it from dragging on the ground. Her hair is up off her neck in an elegant bun. I wonder if she did that herself and where she learned to do it. Earlier, I offered to hire a hairdresser to come to the house, but she waved me off.

The closer she gets, the deeper her blush, but she *must* realize she has no reason to be self-conscious. Not when she's a fucking vision. And the reason behind my private shopper's raise.

A firm slap to my back tries to interrupt my unyielding stare. Death itself wouldn't make me look away from Ariella though.

"Dude, tongue back in your mouth. You're drooling. Quite unattractive for someone of your old age of thirty-one." When I'm about to shove my cousin through the door, he shoulders me aside and dramatically drops into a bow as Ariella lands on the bottom stop. "Mrs. Rossi, you get prettier every time we meet."

She smirks but her eyes find me, which makes my cousin's antics less irritating.

Caladin notices too and with a dramatic pout, he straightens. "Fine, fine, I got the hint. Meet you two in the car."

"Back seat," I holler after him. He replies with a loud laugh

Once the door's shut and Ariella and I are alone, I'm able to fully appreciate her. Unabashed and without a pesky voice over my shoulder.

"God, Ariella." I reach for her, my arm finding an easy home around her waist. "I'm seconds away from calling my mother and telling her to cancel this stupid party. What I wouldn't give for a repeat of this morning with you in this gown."

Eating her out on the piano is another memory I'll re-live. Every new experience with her replacing the last. Even when I had her spread like a meal, she silently took what she wanted, what she needed, and the release her body gifted me was proof of what we can be.

Ariella shakes her head and types on her phone. She grips it like a lifeline, which I suppose it might exactly be that tonight. She's not leaving my side though.

My own pings with her message.

ARIELLA

We can't because it'll cause drama. You've shielded me well but we both know what this marriage means to your role. I must step up at some point.

Once, I'd be pleased by that message, but I'm finding myself disappointed she's becoming stronger and more confident. Not because I wish to *not* see her rise up as my queen, but rather, I'm becoming selfish where she's concerned and want to keep her all to myself.

Reaching for her, unable to stop touching, I curl a loose tendril of hair around her ear. "I hate that you're right. Plus, my mother will bitch to the

end of eternity and no one wants that. Rain check, I suppose."

Looping her arm through mine, I lead her to the passenger side of the car. Once she's seated and buckled in, I join her and Caladin in the car, and we head to a night I'd rather do without.

The moment we're off my property, Caladin leans forward, putting his face between our seats. "So. Yeah. Thanks for letting me tag along on date night."

"Put your seat belt on," I command, unamused.

Completely ignoring me, he utters to Ariella, "He's no fun. All day, the bastard has me running around on an errand and *this* is the thanks I get! Whatever. I'll cab it home."

"Trust me," I say dryly, "the means in which you get home later isn't even a blip on my mind." Especially for mentioning an errand that Ariella certainly doesn't need to know about.

The moment she picks up her phone, I know her text is for me, so when the screen on the car's dash flashes with a message, thanks to the Bluetooth connection, we all get to read it.

ARIELLA

Don't be mean. We can at least drive him home.

"Ha!" Caladin slaps my shoulder. "What she said. I like her, Erico. When you eventually force me down the aisle for whatever random alliance you decide to utilize me for, make sure the bride will be as pretty and as amusing as this one." Then he turns his charming smile right to my wife, who meets it with her own.

Caladin's not a threat and I know he's only pulling this shit to get a rise out of me. So I should ignore it, but damn, he makes it impossible.

Thankfully, since the venue is so close, we quickly arrive. The rustic-style club is lit up with streamers of fairy lights going from pole to pole, wrapping the roof, and illuminating the dark area.

A red carpet is laid out…because Mother. It's a hint of how flashy she's made this event be. Father always appreciated her willingness to be the perfect mafia wife, but glancing at my own, I'm learning there's numerous definitions of the word *perfect*.

I park by the valet's stall and he opens Ariella's door, assisting her out. Caladin and I both get out, simultaneously buttoning our suits' coats up.

Before I manage a step toward Ariella, Caladin's arm blocks my way. "Jesus, man, I didn't realize until witnessing you tonight. You're downright obsessed with your wife. You're falling for her, aren't you?"

"Shut up," is my mumbled reply as I push him away and join Ariella, after handing my keys off to the valet.

Caladin, still laughing, strides up the red carpet and through the double doors, giving us a peek of the chaos inside. Taking Ariella's arm into mine, I pose us to look how everyone in there expects us to. A partnership. A Boss and his queen.

"Ready?"

She nods. But in her mind, I think she's shaking her head no.

"Sooner this starts, the sooner we get home. Think we'll need a long, hot shower after this."

The moment we enter the building's lobby, Mother is on us immediately, her pin straight hair as sharp as her delicate nerves and cat-like nails that jab in my direction. "You're late by five minutes. Bad form considering all your men have come out for this. Some even travelling—"

Ignoring her, I pull Ariella through the next set of doors and the noise of chatter from hundreds of guests help tune my mother out. The party is the lesser of two evils at this point.

Guests turn, some tipping heads respectfully, others murmuring to one another. All their attention lands on the woman at my side. Most with curious stares, others even managing gentle smiles. That's good. Cools my blood, knowing I won't be fighting my own men on her behalf tonight.

The old-style country club with dark wooden beams running through the ceiling gives this place a cabin vibe. Each beam is strung with fairy lights, which is very typical of my mother's design preferences. At the far end, a long table that stretches the room is home to more food than we can all possibly eat, complete with a giant ass five-tiered cake at one end. A fucking wedding cake.

My mother's trying to make a point.

If this night already didn't suck, it certainly does now when a body breaks from the crowd, heading toward us. The very someone who magically disappeared on a plane and hasn't been heard of since.

Father approaches, his snake-like smile flicking between Ariella and me. "We need to have a quick meeting. Leave Ariella here."

Leave my wife alone in the lion’s den? Not likely. But fuck, if I need to speak with him. To demand what the fuck he’s up to with the Volkovs.

Even as Father tugs on my free arm, I shove him away, not being subtle for our guests. “Your meeting can wait until I at least have her settled.”

With a sneer, Father brushes his hand down his suit jacket before gesturing into the crowd. As if knowing, the couple people lingering there shift aside, baring the way for another man to approach. He grins too toothily, as though he’s already won a game only he’s playing.

“You see, son. Waiting isn’t an option.”

Ursin fucking Volkov.

Ariella

Erico turns us immediately away from his father, his eyes scanning the massive crowd. This reminds me a lot of Della's engagement party, when people whose names she'll spend years trying to remember descended, all wanting to speak with Nico Corsetti's future bride.

Hundreds of curious faces stare at me with varying degrees of interest. They remain back, likely awaiting Erico's permission to approach, which honestly, I hope he'll never give. By his side, I'm safe. With them…I can't say for certain.

Walls up. Mask on.

Learning to hide my depression from people has taught me to use the same skill for the other, unwanted emotions, like the anxiety presently making me cold. Causing my nails to dig into Erico's sleeve as a silent plea for him to not leave my side.

"Where the fuck did Caladin go?" he mutters, doing a visual sweep of the venue. "Him, I trust leaving you with."

I want to make my fears known to him, but with the crowd still observing us so closely, they'll pounce. And that's not including the very large mountain of a man standing beside Erico's father, who's watching us with a chilling look in his depthless eyes.

A thin, cool arm snakes mine and an even icier voice says, “Go with your father, Erico. It’s time I officially meet my daughter-in-law.”

Fuck. Having seen Gia Rossi at Della’s party, I avoided her even then. Luckily, I had no reason to approach the three Rossis and remained in the shadows when I wasn’t by Della’s side. And minutes ago, with our arrival, Erico moved us past her so quickly, I didn’t get a good enough look at my mother-in-law.

She’s tall, reaching a foot over my shoulder, though I suspect her heels have something to do with that. Her face is packed with too much makeup for my liking, her eyeshadow a bright contrast to the plain, white dress she wears. It’s long, reminding me of a wedding dress. Her hair, the exact dark shade as Erico’s, is pin straight down her back.

Cold eyes study me while I’m doing the same to her, and at the end of her examination, she smiles too widely. It’s fake. Being practiced in feigning emotions, it’s easier to spot when someone else does it too. So I shoot her back an identical smile, and wonder if she sees through me as well.

We’re trapped between both his parents, leaving Erico with little option. I manage a reassuring look his way, which based on the furrow in his brows, he doesn’t believe at all. Still, with a final scan of my face, he follows his father and the other man through the crowd, which parts for them.

Once they’re gone, leaving me alone with Gia and a room full of strangers, his mother gets right to it. “Lovely dress,” she comments, reaching out to pinch at the skirt. “A little bold for my liking, but we all have our own preferences, don’t you agree? I prefer muted tones, especially for such events. But you’ll learn.”

Insults tossed into a compliment. Got it.

I throw her back another sugary smile and scan the room, searching for Caladin again. Erico’s cousin is amusing, and I’d much prefer him to Gia’s company.

You’re being silly. This is Erico’s mother. You’re stuck with her for the rest of your life.

Gia pats my hand in a way that seems affectionate to outsiders but against my numb skin, it feels like a warning. “Erico will be back soon. Come on. Let’s get the introductions underway. Everyone’s dying to meet you.”

Before I can fully take in her words, she's pulling me into the crowd, stopping at a couple, and then a group, and then another, doing all the talking while I remain silent. I don't even bother with my phone to type responses, letting Gia take the lead. Besides, even if I wanted to add in my own reply, at the speed Gia yanks me around, it'd be impossible to do so. She never hesitates in mentioning my mutism, and now I get Erico's aversion to his mother. Bitch.

Her standard greeting: *"Hello [whoever she's dragged me to]. This is Ariella, Erico's new wife and the newest member to the* Famiglia. *Already, she's taken on such a burden. I should note, if she doesn't respond, it's because she's mute. Bye now. Enjoy the party!"*

Again: bitch.

Thankfully, that message is met with a few different responses, mainly from the other wives. Some icy looks, but a lot of easing smiles, and even an attempt to talk directly to me before Gia's yanking me away from the kindness. Some of them even prove to not be half-bad when they glare at Gia but smile at me. Probably a lot of women here in similar circumstances, and we're all just playing this game.

Every time we take a pass through the room, I scan for Erico. He's bound to be back soon. How long could this random meeting possibly be?

Gia eventually leads me toward tables of food and drinks. Without looking toward the staff, she holds out a hand and a waiter, comprehending her silent demand, places a champagne flute into it. She first offers it to me, but I shake my head, earning only a narrowed glare in response. At this point in the night though, haven't I've done enough?

"Very well. We don't know how well you handle your liquor yet anyway, and the last thing Erico needs is for you to embarrass him in front of his business partners."

Embarrass him after one champagne flute? Whatever.

Maintaining her glare, I hold out my hand to make a point, and the wide-eyed server slips a glass into my hand too. I despise champagne, learned that at Della's party, ironically enough. But the tiny sip I allow between barely parted lips is worth the look on her face.

Chin tilting a fraction, nose in the air, she steps around me. "Well, Ariella, this is where I leave you. Erico's bound to return shortly. It was lovely to formally meet you. We need to get together soon for lunch."

Sounds horrible. I lift my glass a few inches in a mini toast, telling her *sounds great* with the action.

When she finally walks away, her heels much too loud for my liking, I hand the flute right back to the server. He takes it with a knowing smirk and rests it in the bin of other discarded glasses.

Gia's barely gone a full minute when someone new approaches. Erico *really* needs to return now so we can finish this thing together and get the fuck out of here. The scent of flowers bombards my nose, like someone bottled a garden and doused her body with it.

The woman stops beside me, her head tilted in a way, so she's looking down on me, despite her only being a few inches taller. Wavy black hair mingles with her dark dress. Her examination of me ends with her arms crossing over her chest, accentuating her curves, which almost look too fake. Her nose hikes like she's smelled something unpleasant, all while she grins. Not forced, but rather, malicious.

I despise her already.

Erico, where are you?

"Hello. Lovely to meet you. After hearing so much about you, I feel like I practically know you by now."

Based on her tone, it's not lovely at all, but more noticeable is the thick, Russian accent.

I force a smile in greeting, looking behind her for escape. She inches to the side, putting herself back in my view.

"It's quite amazing Erico even married you. Mousy. Don't see the attraction at all."

A mix of insults and self-depreciating agreements run through my head, resulting in me just gaping instead, unsure how to respond or act. Still knowing, I need escape though.

"Ah, sorry, I should introduce myself." Her hand comes out toward me, but I don't return the shake, only earning a chillier glare from her. "My name is Vanessa Volkov. From the Bratva."

Another mafia family, I think? If she believes her name will mean something to me, she's sorely mistaken me for someone who knows what the fuck they're doing.

Another step to the right, another fake smile. Anything to end this odd conversation, but then she continues, her voice like nails on a chalkboard,

and it has nothing to do with the loud accent. “Oh, but I skipped over who I *should* be. I’m the woman Erico was supposed to marry.”

Those words make me pause because who *is* this woman? I am very aware of who Erico was supposed to marry instead of me. Hell, I lived with her. Was present when Aurora learned of her eventual engagement, and then watched the union go up in flames when she chose her bodyguard, Rosen, instead. Or was Erico engaged to this woman even before the agreement for Aurora’s hand?

Nico would have mentioned that to me…right? And according to Della, the deal for Aurora’s hand was struck a year before she was even returned home. Erico wouldn’t have made such a deal if he was already engaged.

She’s lying.

“At least, I’ll be by his side one day,” she continues in a sing-song voice before abruptly gasping, her hands flying to cover her mouth. It doesn’t hide her evil grin because she knows precisely what she’s done. “Shit. Excuse me. I hadn’t meant to speak out of turn. Well,” she lowers her hands, her malicious smirk expanding slowly, “now that—what’s the saying? Now that the cat’s out of the bag? Yeah, that. At least you’re aware of your future. Of being tossed aside. Where do you think your husband is right now? He’s working out a deal with my father.”

Lies. Fucking lies. That’s not who Erico is. Not what he’d do to me.

For once in my damn life, I hate that my voice is broken. I *hate* that I can’t fight for myself, so all I do is walk away. Teeth smashed together, right back into the crowd, praying anyone will begin talking to me, to save me. Caladin’s the preferred option, but right now, I’ll even take Gia’s bitchiness over what I just experienced.

I open my mouth, practicing what I would tell this Vanessa woman if I could, pretending I’m able to fight for myself when—

Crash!

Metal scraping against metal.

Tires squealing.

Vanessa follows, shoving aside a couple until her hand clamps down on my shoulder and she’s spinning me around, leaning much too close for my liking. “Pathetic, *Mrs. Rossi.* Enjoy the name while you can because you won’t have it for long.”

Snarling, I shove her off me, earning a shocked gasp. People nearby murmur, but I don’t care. Rage pulses behind my palms. I’m so sick of

people assuming everything about me simply because my voice is broken.

My voice is broken.

I'm not.

I turn away again.

"Ariella, you must admit, I'm the better option for him. After all, you can't even *speak* to—"

Smack!

My hand burns, the sound of skin on skin bringing the entire party to a silent screech. Everyone who wasn't already watching the action is now. Gia appears, her mouth open, eyes narrowed on me rather than Vanessa.

Breathing heavy, I glance at my reddened hand and then to the matching shape on Vanessa's cheek. *I hit her*. Holy fuck, I don't even remember turning back around, but I had. Wrath controlled my actions, shutting her lies up, and taking control of me.

"What the fuck is going? Move!" Erico's voice cuts through the crowd and he and two other large men appear at the edge of the crowd. His father, whose looking between Vanessa and me, and presumably her father, if her earlier words are even half-true. He heads to Vanessa's side, removing her palm from where she's covering her injury, his own cheeks flushing as red as I've made her skin.

Erico *was* talking to Vanessa's father…

No. This isn't what it looks like. I heard the conversation when we arrived. Erico's father was the one who dragged him away. He never wanted to go.

Erico immediately comes to my side and cups my cheek before checking over my sore hand. His eyes search mine for an explanation. "Are you okay?"

I nod. Emotionally sore, but the pain in my hand is so worth shutting Vanessa up.

Watching Erico become Boss is a shift I see with my own eyes. His care and kindness melts away, leaving his dark eyes as lifeless as the day I met with him in Nico's office. His expression is deadly, empty. He drops my hand and gives me his back, one arm slightly angled to shield me. Protecting me even now.

"Get the fuck out," he commands to Vanessa's father in an icy tone.

The man steps in front of his daughter, recreating a similar position Erico is to me. "Excuse me? Your wife owes my daughter an apology. She

slapped her. Abused her! What kind of *Famiglia* respect is this?"

"Respect," Erico repeats with a tone I've never heard from him before —and hope to never again. "You dare come onto *my* property and talk about fucking respect? I said it back there," he gestures in the direction they came from, "and I'll say it again. Go home to Russia and get out of the States. You are trespassing because you were not invited by me. I don't care what promises my father made you, but you are not welcome until *I* say you are. You want a war, Volkov?"

Erico's father steps forward, trying to diffuse the situation, but based on his stance, it's clear whose side he's talking. Not his son's. "Erico, we've talked about this. I don't think this," his gaze darts around the room, "is the best place for this conversation."

Erico doesn't spare his father a glance. His hand goes for his holster and he unclips his gun, angling it at Vanessa's father who doesn't bat an eye, even with a deadly weapon trained on him. The crowd backs up a few steps while Erico's father lifts his hands, gesturing for Erico to lower the gun.

"There's already a war," Vanessa's father warns. "One of yours hit *my* daughter."

"Ursin, we're both aware who enticed my wife to hit Vanessa. The next time your bitch of a daughter even *looks* in my wife's direction, I'll kill her myself. Do not test me."

Vanessa's face flashes white, making the red mark on her cheek even bolder. She grasps at her father's back at the same time he—Ursin, Erico referred to him as—pulls out his own gun. Before he cocks it, Erico's father once again steps between the men, only this time, faces Ursin. They share a few mumbled words, which Erico doesn't allow them to finish.

"Volkov, ten seconds. I'm not playing. You were not invited to my country, so get out. If you need a reminder of where you are: you're in a room packed full of men who'll kill you and your daughter at my command. Get out of my city. Get out of my country within the hour. If you don't, we *will* fire first."

Ursin shoots one final scathing glare Erico's way before grasping Vanessa's wrist and pulling her through the crowd. People move for them to pass, their attention stalking them. Erico's also staring in the direction they go, and only when they exit the building, does he gesture to unnamed figures in the room. Soldiers step forward from the party's edges, somehow

remaining subtly in the background this entire time. One of them is Sebastian, who meets my surprised gaze before focusing on Erico's orders.

"Follow them to the airport. Make sure they get out of this country within the hour. Call me if they linger."

The trail of four men follow the Volkovs.

With them gone, I suck in air. So does everyone else, I think, even though the room is still tense. Electrified. I touch Erico's back, hoping to gain his attention again, to calm him down, but beneath his suit, all I feel is his seething, deep breaths. He lowers his gun and tucks it back into the holster, so that's progress.

His father steps forward, gesturing to the crowd of onlookers. "Well, now that that's been—"

"We're leaving."

Erico reaches for me and tucks an arm around me. I curl into him, breathing in his scent. Two weeks ago, I never would have believed Erico Rossi would be my safety net. When I assumed he'd drown me in this life, he's been the one keeping my head above the waves.

Gia joins her husband, scanning the room, her expression almost nervous. "Son, what—what are you doing? That was an unfortunate mishap, but you don't need to leave over it."

He stops in his tracks, turning slowly to his parents. "The *only* thing protecting your asses right now is the blood we share. You don't think I'm smart enough to see through the bullshit charade that was? You invited them here when I've made my stance explicitly clear. Mother agrees to keep Ariella company the moment we arrive so you, Father, can pull me into some backdoor meeting. Then *conveniently* Vanessa finds her way to my wife's side."

Gia scans the crowd again and speaks low, even though everyone in the room is so attuned to the family drama laid out in front of them, they probably still hear her. "Erico, enough. We'll discuss this later."

"Yeah," he agrees, surprising me, "we will discuss this later. Another day, another month, another fucking year. For now, we're done." He grasps my hand, but instead of pulling me toward the door, he faces the crowd. "Thank you all for coming. This is my wife, Ariella. She's your queen and you'll all fucking treat her as such. If you don't, hopefully today is a display of what will happen."

And then we're gone, outside in another breath, and he immediately gestures to the valet who rushes to the side of the building to retrieve his car.

The moment we're alone, Erico cups my face, smashing his lips to mine in a rough, possessive kiss I'm all too happy to accept. *If* there were any leftover doubts from Vanessa's words, his mouth removes them.

"God, Ariella. Do I even want to know how that happened?"

Probably not. But what's most relieving is that he didn't immediately ask for the story inside. He took my side and asked questions later.

Like an equal partnership.

I lift my phone between us and shoot him a text, mentioning all the things Vanessa said to me. For the first time, Erico glares at the phone, as though annoyed I'm unable to use my voice.

When his dings, he quickly reads my message, cursing, and glares down the dark road. "Fucking bitch. I'll hunt her down so she can pay for every single thing she said."

Don't. I shake my head, holding onto his lapel just as his car arrives. The valet hands over the keys and Erico helps me into the car. The short drive goes quicker than our trip here, and glancing at the speedometer proves why. Not a terrifying speed, but certainly an energy to get us home quicker.

He abandons the car in front of the house and helps me out, his hand stroking over the one I slapped Vanessa with. "Sore?"

I shake my head. Not anymore.

"Let's get you inside and into bed."

Erico

Once Ariella showers and is in bed, she stares expectantly at me because I mentioned on the drive home I'd provide an explanation of what happened tonight. She deserves it, and I want to give it.

This night, while suspected would be shitty, turned out so much worse. Now I'm on the verge of war with the Bratva and at odds with my snake of a father.

I take a seat on the edge of the bed, leaning on the post and start. "A few days before our wedding, my father came to me with a different proposition. One that would have us aligned with the Russian Bratva by marrying Vanessa Volkov. Father never completely liked my deal with the Corsettis, so when Nico offered you in Aurora's stead, he saw this as the Corsettis getting away with treachery, now twice in one lifetime."

Her expression lowers and I can all but see the thoughts racing in her head. The self-doubts returning.

"I denied him right then and there. Said I'd honour the deal Nico and I made originally, and then the revised one with you."

Why? she mouths.

"For the same reason I agreed to wed you, Ariella. From the moment we met, I was intrigued. As I've said in the past, I couldn't deny your offer and

already made up my mind—we both did. What my father proposed could be profitable for the *Famiglia*, but I wanted you instead."

Her ocean-coloured eyes soften, melting away some of those doubts.

"He was adamant though. Determined to gain the Bratva. After we married, I figured he'd drop it considering—" I lift my left hand, using my thumb to spin my wedding band, finishing my sentence with the action. "Tonight was a complete surprise. The moment I saw Ursin approach, I knew it wasn't over. Rather than argue in front of everyone, I figured it'd be safer to hear them out." Little did I know how wrong I was. "Fuck, Ariella, I'm sorry."

She shakes her head, her brows dipping. Her mouth opens and shuts twice before she retrieves her phone.

ARIELLA

What happened wasn't your fault.

It was, but I won't waste time arguing.

"Vanessa wouldn't have approached you if I was there, so it was. In the back room, her father tried to convince me to divorce you and wed her. After denying both him and my father a few times, I was determined to return to your side, but the moment I entered, the loudest sound echoed through the room, silencing everyone else." Despite everything, I chuckle, recalling the confusion, and the utter pride when I realized it was her, hand red from standing up for herself. "Everything that bitch told you was a lie to tear you down. I'm not marrying her."

ARIELLA

You're not mad I hit someone?

My laugh isn't contained. I abandon my phone and walk around the bed, taking her face between my palms. My obsession with touching her has grown to unhealthy lengths, but the more we're around one another, the less I care about the distance I once craved.

"Mad? *Sirena,* I'm far from fucking mad. I'm proud you defended yourself. If I'm mad at anyone, it's myself, my parents, and the Volkovs. Not you." The one positive in this: the *Famiglia* wives now know not to fuck with her. "You slapped the Bratva's daughter without hesitation. You're a hundred times the woman she is. With every fibre of my being, I

pledge there is *nothing* the Volkovs will offer me that'll have me choosing her over you. I'm too addicted to you to release you."

I release her face because even with all that said, an energy thrums through me and I know the precise way to release it. The look in her eyes offers one way, but I won't be gentle tonight, or even submissive. I need to hurt someone and it certainly won't be in this bed.

Before doubt creeps into her gaze again, I kiss her forehead, gently stroking her wet hair away from her face. "I need to deal with a few things. Make sure my father's not planning an uprising as we speak, and to ensure the Volkovs left the city. I'll be back way later, okay? Get some sleep."

Whatever's in her head gets masked and she covers my hand with her own, nodding once. But before I pull away entirely, her hand snakes behind my neck and she pulls me in for a kiss.

The moment her tongue strokes over mine, I feel myself losing it. Restraint. Rationality. The need to climb over her, pin her down, and fuck her into the mattress grows stronger, and my *sirena* of a wife knows it too. She reclines onto the pillows, taking me with her, tempting my control. Before it's gone entirely, I manage to pin her wrists to her side, preventing her from further touching me as I break our kiss and glance meaningfully at my hold, so she comprehends my next statement better.

"I hate denying you but I'm not what you need. I'll demand control and that's not something I want for you right now."

She bites her bottom lip but nods, agreeing. Not arguing the fact that what I give *could* be what she needs—because we both know it'd be a repeat of previous experiences for her. That alone, her recognition, brings a smile to my face.

I release her wrists and straighten, turning away from the lure of her siren call.

ME

Gym. Join if you want, or don't. I need to release my energy somehow and right now, a fight is really fucking appealing.

CALADIN

But I have a sure thing in my bed.

ME

Then don’t come.

CALADIN

But the practice will be good for me. It’s been weeks since I’ve had a fight scheduled. Can’t let my body slip.

ME

So come. You’re pissing me off. Also, I have another job for you.

CALADIN

You don’t stop, do you?

ME

Not when it comes to my wife. Where the fuck were you at the party?

CALADIN

Hiding. Looking for ways to sneak out. Wish I stayed closer. Could have kept the snakes away from her. Sorry.

ME

Yeah, me too.

CALADIN

I’ll be the first to admit I never expected her to do THAT. Admirable. Firecracker beneath the silence, huh?

ME

You’re the second because I’m the first. But yes, she’s stronger than she lets on.

I assume you’re on your way over? I’m pulling up to the gym. Considering you’ve been talking with me instead of enjoying your “sure thing,” she can’t be that great.

CALADIN

I’m leaving. Fucker.

After a drive faster than I’d risk with Ariella in the car, I park in front of the *Famiglia* gym in Brooklyn. It’s an old warehouse that was converted into a space for us years ago, only a half block away from the one we use to torture enemies in.

I exit my car, which had anyone else owned, would be attractive for thieves in this area of the city, but this is *Famiglia* property and New Yorkers know better than to even glance at this stretch of land.

I head inside to change into shorts and a workout tee I leave here for this occasion and head to the far corner, with the blue mats, to begin stretching and warming up. Sending slow punches to the hanging punching bags, bouncing on the balls of my feet to prepare for my scrap with Caladin.

Within thirty minutes, the doors open and my cousin walks in, grinning in the infectious way he does. Fucker loves this shit. While I race, he's one of the top fighters in our underground rings. When he's not doing his job, his free time is at this gym, constantly training and working out.

He's already changed and after tossing his metal water bottle to the side of the mats, he steps up, jerking his chin toward me. "Shouldn't you be off caring for your wife?"

My fists slam a final time into the punching bag, my breaths coming heavier with my warm-up when I speak. "Fighting you means not hunting the Russians." Which would be a battle I wouldn't win without proper preparation.

"Got it."

"Warm-up?"

He scoffs. "As if. *You* will be the warm-up."

He's likely correct. We're evenly matched in terms of bulk, but he fights a lot more than me. He's always preferred the physical over the weapons that I usually revert to. When we spar, I have him pinned first maybe only two percent of the time. He wins the rest. It doesn't bother me though.

Knowing his tells and his moves, I swoop in, reaching for his legs. Caladin fights a lot of people who make the obvious choice of where to attack first, so he shouldn't be expecting me to follow one of his own moves.

He goes high, while I go low, as expected, and a shoulder into his gut has breath whooshing out of him. Throwing my bulk at him, I knock us both to the ground, my arm reaching for his neck.

He evades me and rolls to his feet, walking back two steps and surveying me as I'm slower to straighten. "What has you in a fighting mood?" he asks between slow pants.

I circle the mat, studying his form, debating how best to attack this time. "My parents pissed me off. They're pulling so much shit in hopes I'll divorce Ariella and send her back to Montreal to get with the Volkov girl."

Caladin curses and drops his arms for a second. This is usually how our fights go though. One punch, one hit, and it leads into a whole conversation.

“Your parents are dicks. No offence.”

With his arms lowered, it’s clearly a tactic because once I’m in range, he throws a leg up, roundhouse kicking me in the side. I stumble before righting myself, throwing myself onto him again but narrowly missing him. My trajectory takes me down to the ground and before I right myself, a shoe’s pressing heavy into my back.

“I win.”

Reaching behind me, I yank at his ankle, but he sees it coming and skips to avoid the grab. But his quick steps make him unsteady and he nearly trips over me. It does what I need though, and with a roll and a swipe of my arm, I trip him.

He lands beside me, panting, the fight momentarily paused as we both catch our breaths. After another moment, he sits up, legs crooked, palms positioned in the mat to keep him upright as he studies me.

“What do the Volkovs have that your father wants so badly?”

“Beats me.” I wipe drops of sweat off my forehead with the edge of my shirt. “Power. Weapons.”

“Personally, I think you made the right decision. For one, the Bratva’s known for backstabbing and I doubt being married to the Boss’s daughter would protect you for long. They’re ruthless, so as fast as you’re saying *I do* to her, Ursin’s getting stabbed in the back and replaced by someone else, in which case, all your dealing might be for nothing. Smarter to have the Canadian connection since they’re closer. More useful. That’s not even comparing the two women.”

I also push into a sitting position, curious of his thoughts on this topic. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I mean, never met Vanessa, but I’ve seen pictures. Pleased your father isn’t trying to use me for the connection. I’d be insulted if I cared. She just *looks* like a bitch.”

“She is.” Thinking about what she did to Ariella today, I recount what my wife told me she said.

“I take it back then. Triple bitch. Good on Ariella for standing up for herself like that. In front of the heads too. They’ll all see now, you and her are the real deal.”

The real deal. The corner of my mouth pulls into a smirk at the concept.

He catches it, of course, and reaches over to shove a hand into my shoulder. “Except, thought you didn’t want the real deal.”

“I didn’t. But she’s…I don’t know, man. Different.”

“Didn’t know that was possible.”

“Me either.” I lift my gaze, focusing on my cousin so he sees my true feelings. “You know better than anyone what I planned for my marriage, but something about her never fit that mold. No matter how much I tried to make it a thing in the beginning, I just…couldn’t.”

“My point exactly, cuz. With Vanessa, you wouldn’t have these struggles. The fact you are with Ariella says she’s best for you.”

His statement would almost be emotional if I didn’t know better. After Caladin lost his parents when he was ten, he blamed them both for orphaning him. Their love for one another was the reason they were together, and he thinks love is dangerous. It made for amusing conversations when we were dumb teens and aware of what our futures would entail: marriage. He doesn’t want love because it’s a danger, and I don’t for how distracting the emotion can be.

“Getting all emotional on me now,” I tease.

He shoves into me again, scoffing. “Whatever. Says the guy obsessing over his wife.” He pushes to his feet in a single, swift movement and reaches a hand down for me. “Come on. We’re not done. Still gotta kick your ass.”

Ariella

Floating on my back in the pool, I reflect on Erico and me. Based on the way he kissed me after the party gone wrong, I was so certain we'd sleep together, but then he pulled away to do his job.

The old me would have fallen into self-deprecating hatred, believing I wasn't enough for him, so I'm proud I didn't. The look in his eyes said he wasn't my Erico, so he's right. Whatever demons were in his head, they were robbing me of my husband, so having sex wouldn't be everything we *could* be.

That was two days ago and since then, it seems like I've hardly seen him besides the time I spend in my music room, when he still takes his breaks to observe, kissing me every chance he gets.

Each night since, he comes to bed very late but seems calm when he does. He always starts out on his side of the bed, but at some time in the night, I end up in his arms, which I don't mind. He's very warm and holds me tightly. He feels like everything I've ever dreamed of finally coming to life.

Maybe the white-picket fence dream is coming true. We haven't spoken about it lately, but he'll need heirs in time. Step one: *be* with him, but if progress continues how it's been, then perhaps our child and me won't only

be an accessory for him. I want to hope we'll be a family. A true family. One I've spent years dreaming about having.

My phone ringing has me rushing from one end of the pool to the other. Water pours off me as I climb out and I quickly wipe my hands on the towel before answering the call, catching Della's name on the screen.

"Hey," she starts immediately. "Haven't heard from you in days, since you left Montreal. How's things?"

"Good. Great." I take a seat on the edge of the pool, dangling my legs into the water as I stare at the glistening ocean around us. The late afternoon sun shines over the calm water.

"Great?" she echoes. "That's…promising."

I shrug though she can't see me. "I don't know, Della. I've been feeling good."

"A certain mafia boss has something to do with that, I assume."

"Yeah. He's just…he's more than I thought I'd get. What I always hoped for."

"You mean the man and life that you used to dream about?" Of course she remembers because when she was trying to talk me out of the union, it was the point she continued to utilize. "That's good though. Not everyone in this life sucks, and I'm glad you're finding happiness. He seemed boring when I met him at the engagement party, but then, he was also with his parents and there to meet Aurora. Seems like you're stealing his heart."

"I wouldn't go that far."

Prickles dance up and down my spine, forcing my gaze away, and to the house behind me. Movement in one of the windows catches my eye and I spot him approaching the window, leaning against the nearest wall to watch me from his office. I smile, even though I'm not sure he can see it from his distance and turn back to face the pool again.

Della makes a noise. "Well. I'm glad things are good. He's not making you uncomfortable at all?"

"Not even close."

"Anything else going on?"

There's been quite a few instances where I've lied to my sister, and I find myself doing it again. Telling her I slapped another person makes for an interesting topic, but then she'll ask why, she'll get defensive because that's who Della is, and that'll all mean telling her about the Volkovs. Which isn't her business.

Not her business. Shit.

Technically, we're on different sides, even if it'll never feel like that. Even if there's an alliance between our husbands, it doesn't mean the Corsettis get to know all of the *Famiglia's* secrets and vice versa.

"Nope," I lie. "Settling more and more in, I guess. You?"

Della gets chatty for a few minutes about herself, her work in one of Nico's clubs, and spending more time with Aurora lately. Jealousy burns through me, but as quick as it's there, it's gone. It makes sense they're getting closer to one another. I wonder if Erico has any female relatives around my age. Given the outcome of the party, I didn't exactly get the chance to meet everyone. Before the accident, having a social life was never my priority, but my sister often provided what I needed. Now, besides Erico, I'm alone.

Once she hangs up, I slip back into the pool. We're still a few hours away from supper, and I'd like to spend at least another one of those in the water.

Not even ten minutes later, the mansion's back door slams shut. Even though I can't see him from where I'm floating on my back, my body thrums with every step he takes. It knows what my eyes haven't looked at yet.

I roll in the water, catching as he drops into a lounge chair, my mouth slipping open as quick as he moves. No suit. Shorts. No shirt. Sunglasses covering his eyes. My mouth waters, my core clenches. He's dressed so casually and looks fucking good.

Dress like that more often.

With one leg on either side of the chair, he reclines back. His head tilts up to the sky, but I still feel his gaze on me. He hasn't said anything, so I continue swimming. Maybe he'll join me. Other than the first day, I've never spotted him in the pool.

I do another few laps on my back. Backstrokes up and down the large pool while he merely observes. Every time I near his end, I feel his eyes on my bare skin. I picked the bikini I had on purpose. Silver and smaller than the rest, for this purpose. After the pool, I was going to visit his office. Based on previous conversations, I think he's waiting for me to make a move.

And I'm ready.

I dreamed of it last night. Of teasing him to the brink, he'll lose his mind. I woke up with a wetness between my legs that made me pleased he was already gone.

So after my final lap, I climb out of the pool. His gaze stalks my every step by him and toward my lounge chair where I pick up my towel to wipe my face, and then grab the water bottle to hydrate.

"How is it, your bikinis get tinier and tinier? Not sure if I owe my shopper a raise or to fire her."

Smirking, I drop the bottle back to the chair and walk to the end of his. He repositions his legs on top, somehow knowing my exact plan as I throw one leg over each of his and lower to his lap. Without asking, I grab his sunglasses and toss them onto the chair beside us, so I can see his eyes.

"You're getting my clothes wet."

I plan to do a lot more than that.

My hands stroke up his bare chest until reaching his neck. I pause there and lean forward, taking his mouth in a heated kiss. He grips my hips, but the moment I feel his touch, I shake my head and replace them by his sides.

"Not allowed to touch, am I?" A single brow hikes.

Head shake.

"You really know how to torment a man."

Nod.

"Fuck, Ariella."

I smirk and kiss him again. He kisses me back, his tongue battling for dominance. The chair squeaks beneath his touch and I assume he's grasping onto it. Then I roll my hips, the same I had in his office that one time. Between my legs, his cock grows.

Without breaking pace, I lean away and reach behind my neck, undoing the string on my bikini top. When marrying Erico, I never thought I'd rediscover any of the confidence I once had—years ago—but this is all him. *He* gives me this strength to put aside everything else.

The bikini top falls forward and his hands shift from the chair to my thighs, curling around my flesh, nearly to the brink of pain.

I'm causing this. *I'm* making him desire me.

I yank on both strings on my hips until my bikini bottoms drop open, baring my pussy to his gaze. His *hungry* gaze.

"Cazza. Bellissimo."

Words unfamiliar to me but based on the reverence in his tone, I think I appreciate them.

“Sarai la mia morte.”

Again. I tilt my head, needing him to translate.

“*Sirena*, you will be my death. I don’t think I’ve wanted a woman as much as I do you.”

His simple statement, whether truthful or not, pushes aside the darkness that constantly encourages me to go beneath the waves. I won’t allow it to consume me today. I’ll win. I’ll be who *I* want to be.

“Ariella, as much as I’d love to fuck you right here and now, I really want you in our bed.”

I nod, glancing around the backyard. With his role, anyone can stumble out here, something I didn’t really consider when I started stripping. In one swoop, he has me in his arms, one beneath my ass, the other around my back. He turns for the door as he take my mouth again, his kiss tasting a bit different than the others.

Tinged with hope.

We somehow make it to the bedroom without falling, and he drops me immediately on the bed. I bounce to a stop and pull him overtop me. He follows, his fingers crawling up my stomach until I remove his hand, pinning it to the bed. Then I push him to the side, until he’s on his back and I’m climbing overtop him, my pussy sliding against his bare skin.

He clasps my hips, but as fast as he grabs me, I stop him with a smirk and a playful shake of my head before pinning his wrists to the pillow beside his head.

Leave those there, I mouth.

He fists the pillow case as I lean down to kiss him, rocking my body against him until I feel his erection beneath me. It’s incredibly erotic for him to still be wearing shorts while I’m naked over him.

He hisses, his grip tightening, and my eyes flick up. A wariness builds that he’ll move them, that he won’t want me like this, that he’ll take over. And then his hands move an inch before stopping again and I freeze, watching him.

“I’m yours to control, Ariella. If you want me to leave my hands here, I will, I promise.” He pauses, his tongue dabbing the corner of his lip. “I have an idea that you don’t have to agree to, but I think it’ll help us both.”

This is it, idiot. You ruined a good thing. You—

Stop!

The voices must stop.

I slide off him, nodding for him to go ahead. He stands from the bed and disappears into the closet, rifling around for only a moment before returning, a black rope hanging from his hand.

No. My right hand curls around my opposite wrist. Being quiet doesn't mean I'm completely innocent, and while I've never been tied up before, there's a reason for it.

He spots my instant guard and rapidly shakes his head. "Fuck, no, Ariella. This isn't for you. I told you, I wouldn't do anything to you that you don't want."

He did. But I suppose fears and instinct arise regardless.

He approaches the bed again and pulls my arms from one another, until he's also sliding me from the bed. He hands me the rope. It's softer than I would have assumed.

"We don't have to," he repeats. "I promise I'll control myself, but I want *you* to completely enjoy this, and constantly checking if I'm moving or not might take you out of the experience. Having more control might give you a bit more comfort. I'm yours, Ariella, however you need me."

I'm yours. That's what's repeated in my head over and over as I nod, glancing around the room, annoyed I've left my phone outside.

Reading me, he understands immediately what I need, and reaches into the back pocket of his shorts for his phone. There's no password anymore and unlocks immediately, almost like he removed the code for this purpose.

I try not to focus on that.

> YOU ONCE SAID YOU ENJOY GIVING UP CONTROL IN THE BEDROOM BUT I NEVER WOULD HAVE THOUGHT BEING RESTRAINED IS YOUR THING.

I expect him to smirk, to tease me for asking, but he merely tips my chin up to better see my face. "Honest truth: it's been a long time since someone has, but it's enjoyable. I *want* you to be free to explore me however you wish to. I'm laying myself in your hands. Tell me what to do, *la mia sirena*."

He doesn't give me a chance to instruct him though—or maybe he simply doesn't give me time to doubt myself because he kisses me again, his hands resting low on my hips.

It's not rope he handed me. It's a continuation of what I had outside.

Courage.

Strength.

Confidence.

The ability to not only finally have sex with my husband, but to be desired. To be trusted to the point, he'll be bound up. If anyone told me six months ago, I'd be wed to a mob boss and minutes away from tying him to *our* bed, I would have laughed in their face and wrote them a song about silly dreams.

He trusts me. If there's a single lesson from all this, it's that.

With this, my trust for him also builds. At this point, I wonder how much of me *doesn't* trust him. And it's with Dr. Shappo's theory that my trust for people is linked to my trauma, I break his kiss and open my mouth to talk.

Crash!

Metal scraping against metal.

Tires squealing.

Fuck. Why did I think it'd be different this time?

Speak, dammit.

Nothing. Air.

Maybe I'm forcing it.

I want this, though. To trust him with my voice and hope he won't destroy that part of me.

Erico's brows meld together and he smooths a thumb down my cheek. "You okay? What's in your head?"

Nothing, I mouth, responding only to his second question. Nothing and everything.

"Don't force it." His thumb drags over my bottom lip. "Not for me. If it never happens, so be it. I'm happy with you either way."

If there was an element of my mask still on my face, it's now gone. Fallen off. Shattered once it hit the ground.

"We also don't have to do this if you're not ready either. There's no rush."

There's not, but I can do this. I *want* to. I'm the one who began this outside, and it's that courage I grasp onto again, gripping it as tightly as I do the rope. I step back and gesture for him to remove what little clothing he's wearing.

Without hesitation, he does, stripping his shorts until his cock bobs free. A part of him I've felt between my legs but never imagined being so…so fucking perfect. The last man I've seen was my high school boyfriend and, with Erico in front of me, I realize he was so far from being a *man*, it's not even funny.

I tilt my head toward the bed, waiting while he stretches in the centre. My thighs clench. My core tightens around nothing—just the promise of what'll be there. With the rope in my hand, I rest it on the bed first, mentally trying to calculate how I'll do this.

"There's four pieces there," Erico cuts into my concerns. "Wrap each around the bedposts and then my wrists and ankles and make a knot we'll be able to untie later."

I nod, following his instructions and manage to do one foot after a moment of struggle. The rope is almost silky, probably for the user's protection, but it doesn't cooperate at first. With Erico's gentle suggestions and his patience for remaining still, I get both ankles tied before kneeling on the bed to do his wrists.

They seem more intimate since my chest is so close to his face as I lean over him. But now practiced, tying his arms go quicker. Right before moving away, Erico snags one of my nipples between his teeth. My body instantly reacts, a moan and a giggle working through me, but I slide away from him before he takes completely over.

His cheeky grin follows me off the bed before he tests his restraints, finding him bound tightly and stuck.

"Seems I'm yours, *sirena*."

I'm starting to believe that, yeah.

Erico

If Ariella seducing me outside wasn't the sexiest thing I've ever experienced, this is. Having her grind on my lap and strip her bikini will easily make its way into my top ten experiences with her, but I think I'm minutes away from number one.

I've spent two days distancing myself from her out of fear I'll rush her. Every passing second, there's a mounting need to consume her. But now there's a desire to watch her consume *me.* Ariella taking control outside was a beautiful fucking thing.

She seems awkward and unsure of herself, but given that she's risen to every challenge, I suspect she will this time too. Me being tied up is as much for her as it is me, and it has little to do with control and domination. Me placing my trust in her pretty, little hands will help her discover her own courage and self-assurance.

But in case she needs further encouragement, I murmur, "Ariella, you choose the pace. Explore how you want to."

She blinks, as though wakening from a trance I almost lost her in. With a small shake of her head, her damp hair clinging to her shoulders, she climbs on the bed and kneels between my legs. I watch her, curious, anticipating where she'll begin when her nails scrape up the insides of my thighs.

My cock becomes harder beneath her gaze, and the moment her hands brush my underside, I'm a goner. Thirty-one fucking years old and I feel like an inexperienced teenager after one brief touch, about to come right fucking then.

She slides a hand around my shaft, slowly stroking me until my teeth sink into my bottom lip and I'm thankful as ever for the ropes keeping me down.

Still, I need to praise her, to reaffirm her actions. "I've never known a woman's hands to be so perfect. *God*, your touch is fucking bliss."

She pauses, casting a doubtful look at me.

"Ariella, I'm fucking serious. Keep it up and we won't have long."

With a rough jerk of her hair, she orders me not to rush my orgasm. That gaze is so fucking expressive, and like it's unlocked something—her confidence—she grins again and tightens her hold on me. One hand strokes the base of my cock, the other petting my head, her thumb circling the sensitive spot, making me groan. She strokes me for another minute before climbing overtop me, placing her wet pussy right against my length.

"God, *sirena*, yes."

She's so fucking warm. Wet. What I wouldn't give to be able to touch her right now…but the knowledge I'll soon be getting to watch her guide me into her also makes up for it.

But instead of heat encompassing my cock, I'm robbed of the promise. Instead, she rocks her cunt against me.

"Ariella."

She shushes me with a hand over my mouth. Even tied, it'd be easy to buck her hand off me, but I've given her this control, and I crave to see how she manages it.

Just like outside, just like the day in my office, she rides my cock. Her wetness ensures there's no friction, which makes breathing fucking impossible. Makes everything but feeling *her* impossible.

"Fucking tease. My beautiful, beautiful tease."

How anyone could mistake this girl for being shy now seems impossible.

Her pace slowly picks up, as does her breathing, quickly becoming shallow, her nails digging into my abs. Her head falls forward, focused, and the grin she once wore is now almost pained, driven with desire, with the craving to come.

My cock demands domination. Demands she untie me so I can throw her onto the mattress and fuck her hard, while the other half of me only wants this—to witness her lose her mind. To finally see her take control of her own life.

She rides me until she's quivering, her legs clamping my waist. Until she moans and the rush of her desire slips from her pussy and soaks my cock, suggesting how drenched she is inside.

Her breaths shallow out, her shoulders lowering as she meets my gaze with a wicked smile. One promising more. One promising happiness. One promising confidence. And that's the fucking sexiest thing in the world. Ariella shining through her own darkness.

"Bellissima." Beautiful. Too tame a word for what's really in my head. "The vision of you this instance will be with me until the day I die."

A striking fact because they're not words said in the moment. They're the fucking truth. And the fact of the matter is exactly that: being aware I'll likely go before my wife. I'll likely eventually fuck up, will be taken out by a bullet when my luck runs out, when the crime life catches up. She'd be a mafia widow, able to move on from my death and find someone outside the entrapment of our marriage.

But now…now that my wife is Ariella, I fucking refuse to let her manage that grief. To allow her to move on. Death will have a motherfucking war on his hands if he thinks to come for me.

Ariella's hands glide up my chest, breaking my thoughts. Her nails scrape over my nipples until cupping my neck as she leans closer. Her wet pussy rubs against my abs while she kisses me slowly, seductively.

Her quiet moan makes me want to break these ropes. To touch her. But I refuse to be like that asshole from her past and force something on her she won't like.

"I'm fucking dying to get my hands on you."

She grins, shaking her head as she inches back down my body again, placing her pussy against my cock. She lifts onto her knees and in one hand, my length.

God, I want to touch her. Just to hold her hips. Not to control anything, but to help her.

But she doesn't need my help. Pauses there, taking only my head into her entrance. I'm not inside her, but the feeling of needing to weep if she doesn't lower herself becomes stronger every second she doesn't.

“You okay?” I manage to ask. There’s no fear present in her expression but still, I have the urge to be certain. “We don’t have to do this.”

Every fibre of my being silently begs for her not to end this. I’ll respect it if she’s not ready, but will also require a cold shower if so.

She shakes her head and then lowers herself another inch, her mouth falling open as my cock stretches her tight pussy. My gaze is torn between wanting to watch her face and wanting to watch her pussy stretch to accommodate my size.

“You’re doing good, baby. Get yourself nice and wet for me. You need to lubricate my cock to accept you.”

She nods, and her free hand, the one not holding me, strokes down the front of her body and—*Fuck.* Two fingers rub at her swollen clit.

My fucking Christ.

She gets herself wetter, even though after her orgasm, she’s plenty fine, but I won’t end this experience for anything in the world. My arms lurch against the restraints, demanding to touch her, to help her with that pretty clit of hers.

She inches onto me again, my head disappearing inside her pussy and that steals every bit of my attention. She sinks another inch, hissing again.

“Give yourself time.”

She obeys, pausing, her eyes shut tight. After a moment, another inch, and my body is so fucking confused how to react. Either lose myself to the bliss or witness her take the rest of me. Ecstasy wins and my eyes clamp shut.

Then she taps on my cheek, and my eyes peel open. She crooks a finger toward her and then makes a sign with two fingers to my eyes, and then lines them up with hers.

Eyes on me, she commands.

With her making the choice for me, I return to watching her take my cock. She looks so fucking perfect, I’d freeze us in this moment if I could.

She releases me and sinks the rest of the way, lifting once and plunging down again. Her cry, feminine, husky, and a hint of her voice, mingles with my groan, both of us stuck in the moment.

And then she rocks herself, lifting onto her knees.

“Shit, fuck, Ariella. Wait.” My jaw clamps, my eyes shutting despite her earlier order.

Focus. Don't come. Don't fucking come. My arms yank on the bindings, seconds away from breaking the headboard to get freed.

She squeezes me so perfectly, it takes repeating the phrase three times along with a few steady, deep breaths, to ensure I don't. That and the fact she actually listened when I said stop and froze overtop me. When I open my eyes and spot the downtrodden expression, I realize why.

Goddamn, the sight of her heartbreak ruins me.

"Out of your head. Whatever you're thinking, isn't it. You feel so fucking perfect, Ariella, and I've been dying to have you. If you don't give me a second, I'll come way too soon."

Her lips purse, considering my words, but as fast as she does, it's gone for the wicked siren to return and she winks. Lifting on her knees, my cock glides out of her halfway, and she sinks down. Three times she does that and three times I curse. My fists are so tight, my bitten down nails imbed into my skin.

I warned her. I fucking *warned* her, but it's there. Tightness runs through my balls, my abs, through my every nerve igniting my orgasm. This is almost embarrassing. I can't come before she does again—this isn't how I imagined this playing out. Ariella deserves to be dripping with desire, limp and wrung out from the numerous orgasms she has before I come.

"Fuck, Ariella. Fuck, fuck—"

She lifts onto her knees, my cock slipping completely out of her. The room's air mingles with my cock, wet from her desire, but it's not cooling at all. Rather, it heats me more. Draws attention to her absence.

She grins, her tongue dabbing at the corner of her lips as she sinks back onto me. I hit the deepest parts of her and she moans, her hands dancing up her stomach until reaching her breasts, and she's pinching her nipples.

My orgasm returns quickly, and while I don't warn her this time, she knows. Probably in my expression, probably in the way I'm yanking on her ropes, maybe even in my growl.

"Goddamn. Wife, you better fucking enjoy this while you can because when I'm free, I'll—"

My threat cuts off when her cunt takes me again. Blinding pleasure fills my vision; white consumes me. I'm coming whether she likes it or not—whether *I* want to right now or not.

Her pussy tightens, pulsing as her low moan fills my ears. It entices my own, which won't be robbed again. With a final lurch into her, I come,

filling her cunt with cum.

The moment her movements slow, she falls onto my chest and reaches up to undo my wrists, and then behind her for my ankles. Somehow, being her submissive was the best and worst thing ever. Worst because not touching her was torture.

I sit up and drag her on top of my lap. Anywhere our skin touches is melded together, not a fraction of space between us. Her hand lands over my rapidly beating heart, and I cover it with my own.

“It takes a lot of trust for me to allow myself to be tied up in another’s presence.” I brush damp strands from her face, hugging her tighter. “But I didn’t even have to debate that with you.”

I trust my wife.

I think I more than trust her if I’m being honest with myself.

Ariella

Is this what happiness feels like?

There's not even a hint of the darkness. All of it has been consumed by the bright light glowing within me. For once, my head isn't weighed down by the immensity of unending wondering. Isn't stressed about the ever-fraying snipping of my fragile nerves.

Well, there is one thing that's poking at the back of my head: good things frequently end, but with how I'm feeling this second, the world could blow up and I'd refuse to move.

Erico hugs me tighter, burying his face in my neck. He inhales, and for some reason, I find this really sexy. I wrap my arms around his neck, just holding him.

Feeling cared for.

Truly cared for and by someone who isn't my blood.

His hands drift down by back and cups my ass, his fingers creeping close to my centre, making me squirm. As his fingers graze my wet core, his cum still dripping from me, I shiver. As he demanded, I stopped taking birth control right before the wedding, but I haven't been tracking my cycle.

Did today do something?

Do I *want* it to do something?

Children have always been a part of my life's plans. Children *now*, when Erico and I are finally in a better place, might be too soon. I'm selfish and want it to only be us for a while longer.

He fingers the cum dripping from my core, lightly rubbing my swollen clit. "You feel fucking amazing, Ariella. Watching you take control of my pleasure was everything I could have imagined and more."

I smile. He was correct in that sex with him, like *that*, was much more enjoyable than any instance in the past, although I'm certain there were a lot of other factors that had gone into it.

Lost in my head, I barely notice when Erico shifts to the end of the bed and takes me with him. He stands and grabs his cell phone before walking us to the bathroom. First, he retrieves a towel and rests it on the counter before setting me on top of it, hands me his phone, and then heads for the large tub on the other side of the room.

After he starts the water and tests the temperature, I write him a message:

> SHOULDN'T I BE THE ONE TAKING CARE OF YOU?
> YOU WERE THE ONE IN ROPES.

He gives me an incredulous look before taking my face in his hands. He seems to enjoy holding my face. Not that I mind whatsoever. "You're all mine, *sirena*. Mine to care for."

All mine. His tone sews that promise right into my heart. Into my emotions where I'll never not be able to relive them.

I smile. A genuine fucking smile.

"After a hot bath to ease your muscles, I plan on feeding you." He lowers one hand to my hip, his fingers splaying along the insides, brushing along my pussy. "And then I'll be eating dessert. Poolside, dining table, our bed, your piano—you pick a spot. I'm eating, one way or the other."

My cheeks flush.

He grins, and it looks entirely youthful and fun, it's easy to forget who this man truly is to everyone outside this bathroom. The look only lasts for a moment though, as he taps my inner thigh.

"Sore?"

A bit. I nod. It's been way too many years since I've had sex, and he's not exactly small by any measurement. The last time I orgasmed before him, had brought myself to completion, has been…I can't recall. Having the desire to bring myself pleasure has been rarely present, considering the darkness so often prevents me from getting out of bed. Tasks like eating are

sometimes a chore I only complete to ensure my mask stays upright; anything extra is simply useless, time consuming, and energy sucking.

Instead of frowning or even grinning, his expression turns almost deadly…cold. Cold with a possessiveness in his gaze that eases me. “Good. I want to be all you feel.”

Well, damn. Can’t argue with that.

With a look I think is reluctance, Erico returns to the tub, switches off the water after a quick additional test, and comes back to my side. He lifts me from the counter and carries me right into the tub, stepping in first and adjusting me as he sits. He takes the phone I’m still holding and rests it on the small table to the opposite side of the tub. Still in reach, but now I can lower my arms beneath the water.

Erico has found the perfect temperature that immediately works at my muscles. My head falls back against his chest, my arms limp over his legs. My knees, which were upright, fall open against the tub’s sides. When Erico rubs my shoulders, I groan, thinking how death could come now and I’d die happily.

“Good?”

“Mm.” Hopefully my noise suffices to do what I need it to, and based on his chuckle, it does.

His hands work down my arms, lightly massaging every part of me. He reaches my thighs and does the same until I’m unable to hold them up at all and they stretch alongside his.

“Sleep if you want.” His hands brush my hair to one shoulder, keeping the other side bare for his lips, which he trails up and down my neck. “I got you, Ariella.”

You do.

So I do exactly as he commands and shut my eyes, not meaning to sleep, but between his touch, the hot water, and the orgasms minutes ago, I drift.

When the water cools, I’m woken by Erico lifting me from the tub. After wrapping a towel around me, holding me in his opposite arm, he notices me blinking awake.

“You slept for about a half hour,” he tells me before carrying me to the bed.

He's still naked and dripping water everywhere but doesn't seem bothered by this. Once laying me on the bed, he disappears again and returns wrapped with a towel around his waist. He hands me his phone which he also retrieved, giving me a voice to reply.

Thank you, I mouth and gesture to the bathroom, indicating the bath.

"You're—" But then he stops, his brows melding together. His lips roll together and with an expression of complete determination, his right hand comes up to his chin and downwards in an arc. At the same time, he mouths, *You're welcome*, but his words don't matter. Because I understood the action.

He used sign language.

Before I allow myself to think on it too long, because it's quite possible he only knows that single sign, he makes more motions: *I've…been… learning.*

Awkward gestures, spaced out as he struggles to remember the correct actions. But he manages. He's signing…

With a crooked smirk, he explains, "Sebastian's been teaching me. Not an easy skill. That's where I've been spending a lot of my evenings. I'm trying, Ariella. You might need to give me time to get it right."

He *is* trying. Not only is he trying; he's *been* trying for a while.

My heart burns, the truth fighting to be freed. To be said.

I think…I think I—

Stop. I can't allow myself to open up *that* much. Not now, not yet. It'll come crashing down if I think it.

I'm torn between needing to get off this bed and go to him, to replying back in ASL, or letting shock keep me down. He gives me no choice by coming around the bed and leaning down for a heated kiss. It doesn't last as long as I'd like before he's dragging me to the closet.

"I'm hungry for dinner. Besides, sooner we eat, the sooner I have dessert."

After dinner was cooked, Erico sent Carlotta away for the night because the moment we were both done eating, he came to my end of the table and dropped to his knees, spread my legs, and buried his head in my pussy, bare because he demanded I not wear anything beneath the short, blue sundress.

When he stands after giving me two orgasms back-to-back, his mouth is wet from me, and all it does is make me want him again. Will there be a time I ever get enough of him?

Erico helps me stand, my legs wobbling when I follow him back to the kitchen. He takes both our dishes, rinses them, and puts them in the dishwasher before pulling me outside to the pool.

There, I collect my phone, noticing a text message from Della she sent hours ago, and my abandoned swimsuit. He snatches that, fingering the strings.

“The moment you left the pool, I was a damn goner. You knew it in your every step, didn’t you?”

I grin.

With the setting sun casting a beautiful orange glow over the property, I take his hand and pull him to the edge, leaning on the glass fence to gaze at the ocean.

My favourite sight, I sign to him, and he seems to catch every word, nodding the entire time.

“It is beautiful,” he agrees. “I’m thankful so many generations ago when my family claimed this as Rossi property, they chose this spot for the mansion. The house they had built was so boring. Too many walls. Reminds me of the Corsetti place. I had this redone recently,” he signals behind us, “to replace the walls with windows. Lets the light in, and the view of the ocean is always around me.”

My stomach knots with how he unknowingly built a house his future wife would adore.

“But I have to disagree on your statement of this being a favourite sight,” he continues. “Once, maybe. But now I’m torn between you in your bikinis, you playing your piano, and you coming on my face, my cock. Just the sight of your orgasm will stay with me forever.”

Forever. Such a long time. It’s everything I’ve wanted from this marriage. Hell, this is *more* than I believed I’d get.

Maybe you are good enough. For once, the dark thoughts are positive.

Testing the strength of those thoughts, I inch closer. Without hesitation, Erico wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me into him. We look like a movie moment, together, staring at nature as the setting sun glows in our eyes. It’d be bothersome if I didn’t love it so much.

There’s so much I don’t know about my husband. So much I only know minimal details of. Such as those races he attends. I can’t picture the mafia boss beside me doing something as reckless as racing cars.

Crash!

Metal scraping against metal.

Tires squealing.

I shake it off, returning to the present. That wouldn’t happen with Erico in the driver’s seat. He seems like someone who’s confident enough. But I also imagine him controlling his car, his glee of a race win, the adrenaline of the rush, the speed in which he flies.

Question, I sign after a moment.

Erico’s hold on me tightens as he brings his arm closer to his other to reply, *Yes?*

When’s your next race? I peek up at him, waiting for his response.

“Sorry, *sirena*, I missed all of that. Don’t recognize those words. I think you started with *when*?”

With my phone, I type the question again.

“Tomorrow night.”

I WANT TO COME.

I angle the phone so he can see and I know the second he reads it, when he jerks away, shaking his head. “No.”

I cross my arms and mouth, *Why?*

“Why?” he repeats, tone incredulous like I’ve asked the most ridiculous thing ever. “You’re asking me *why* you, after experiencing a horrible vehicle accident, aren’t authorized to come with me to a damn race?”

Yes, I reply with my hands, even though I know he was being sarcastic in his question.

He shakes his head—more of a rough jerk. “You think I would risk you like that?”

YOU WON’T HURT ME. I’M SURE YOU’RE A GOOD DRIVER

I message and show him my phone.

“And if something happens? There’s a reason my parents would lose their fucking minds if they learned I do this, and have been for a few years. It’s dangerous. One flash, one hit, and done.”

I hike my brow. I’m more than aware of what occurs in accidents.

He paces away, growling, his hands dragging through his hair. He's not winning this though.

ME

Please, Erico. I'm trying to learn more about my husband. Trying to be a good wife. I want to see your interests.

He takes his phone from his pocket, to read his most recent text. Instead of turning around to talk, he messages back.

ERICO

You being aware of them is enough.

ME

Not for me.

I walk toward him, resting my palm against his back. *Please,* I say in my head. My lips even form the words. Sound doesn't follow, but I wish it did. I wish I could be better—try harder to speak with him.

He turns abruptly, his hands clamping on my upper arms so tight, I nearly drop my phone in surprise. "Fine," he says in a tone implying it's not at all. "The races are quick. It's a thrill and a payout from the betting pot. I've never had a near-miss and I won't this time either."

The facts he lists seem to be more for himself than me.

"Tomorrow. Nine-thirty, be ready." His gaze drops to my bare thighs peeking beneath the sundress. "Not a dress. Pants. Now, excuse me. I have a lesson with Sebastian."

He walks away, shaking his head.

A therapist at the medical centre once encouraged systematic desensitization. It was with her support, getting back into a car as a passenger was doable. It's how I know tomorrow night will be fine. No lights, no traffic, and more importantly, no evil stepfather. Just Erico and me, and a quick drive.

It'll be fun. I'll consider this another stage in the desensitization process.

Erico

I must be out of my fucking mind.

Racing has never scared me. I'm in control, I win. My cars are made for this. It's an easy and thrilling time. At one of my last races, ironically, I did imagine Ariella in my passenger seat—for a brief second before I remembered all the reasons it wouldn't happen.

Guilt's a bitch. Our three-hour drive to Brooklyn, where the race is being held, will be at speeds faster than the legal posted limit, as a test. If she can't manage that, we head home. If she can, then I'll be ten percent more comfortable with what's about to occur.

I park my McLaren by the front of the house while waiting for her to finish getting ready. If she obeys and puts on what I've laid out on the bed, then she'll be exiting the house in baggy jeans and one of my hoodies. Where we're going, I want her covered.

The sky above, though nighttime, grows darker. Grey clouds overshadowing the moon, threatening rain the weather app warned me about minutes ago. All day, it's been clear skies, but obviously, the weather's decided now to be a dick. I've raced in rain before, but it's never ideal, and with Ariella in the car, it's even less so. The roads get slicker, the stakes higher.

I lean against the hood to wait her out and call Caladin, in the meantime, to update him. He'll be there tonight, as he frequently is, making the deals and amping up the betting.

"Hey!" A loud thumping in the background slowly fades. Presumably, he's turning down his music. "Running home to change and then heading over. You on the road? You're not exactly in the city, so if you want to make the time, better get on it."

"Home. Waiting for Ariella to finish getting ready."

Silence. *Cough.* "What? She's coming?"

"She insisted." Much to my chagrin.

"The silent woman insisted?" he asks with doubt.

I chuckle, thinking of her tenacity. "You'd be surprised how expressive she is."

"You're okay with it? Given her past—"

"You think I want to?" I interrupt harshly. "You know what's there. Who's there. The kinds of people attending these things. Focusing on the race is one thing, but having her around all those dirty fuckers will be a whole extra task. But she has this damn hold on me, cuz, I can't help but grant her this, even though I also want to keep her here, locked away for safety." Still an option… "She won't leave my side, and everyone will know better than to fuck with her. I won't hesitate to put a bullet in an asshole's skull if he looks at her wrong."

"Plus, I'll be there."

"Yeah," I agree, though I have no intention of requiring his support. "It's a one-time thing. She thinks she can handle this, and you know what, maybe she can. Maybe we're all too careful with her. She knows herself, her past. She's smart, Caladin. She wouldn't have asked for this if she didn't think she was ready."

"Whipped," he comments with amusement. "Fine, whatever. Just get here soon. The sky's getting dark, but as long as the rain stays away for another few hours, we're good. Anyway, I just got home from the gym. See you two soon."

Click. And right on time because then the mansion's front door opens and Ariella bounds down the stairs, coming to a stop right in front of me where I'm perched on my hood.

"Fucking Christ, you're going to get me killed."

In a less-than-shocking turnout, she ignored my suggested outfit completely and is instead wearing a white dress. High on the thigh, and a scooped neck, her arms bare. Between it, and her hair in gentle waves around her, she's a contrast to the darkness, which I suppose is a positive thing. Her lips are a bright red, matching her hair, her eyes shadowed with dark makeup. Her feet are encased in black ballet flats.

She looks so damn innocent. Delicious.

And if it wasn't for the mischievous look in her eyes, I'd believe she *is* innocent.

I push off the hood to bring her between my legs. "My god, did you *not* see the clothes I laid out for you?"

She rolls her eyes and brings her phone between us, types, and then turns so the screen faces me.

> DO I LOOK LIKE SOMEONE WHO'LL BE TOLD WHAT TO WEAR?

"You will if you don't want people to die." She tilts her head, so I add, "When we arrive, you stick to my side. No exceptions. The moment you attempt to stray, I'll throw your ass in this car and we're coming home. Where we're going, there's criminals, and I won't take a chance with you." Even if they know not to fuck with me.

Slowly, a smirk stretches her red lips. She's adorable in a sexy way and I admire her as she signs something, which means it's a simple statement. All day, she's been talking more and more with her hands, sticking to easy sentences, which I'm grateful of, and I've been replying when I can. Even when I'm wrong, the smile she gives me for every attempt is worth a thousand failures.

You're suddenly possessive.

"I was always possessive." I line her hips up with mine, my hands fingering the edge of her dress. "I now have a reason to show it." Shoving away from the car entirely, I walk her to the passenger seat and hold open the door.

Once we're both inside, my hand rests on her thigh. With her position, her dress has ridden up, and now, I don't care about the outfit she's chosen. In fact, I love it. My fingers dig into her thighs, instructing her to remain still.

It’s with one hand, I take us down the road and off our property at a speed that would get me pulled over by the cops, if it isn’t for the recognizable plates on this car.

The near-three-hour drive back into the city is long and has me wondering if I should bring her to my condo sometime. It’d be much more convenient to have her closer to my work than way out here, but then she’d lose the pool and her music room, which occupies so much of her days, so as quick as the idea comes, I shove it away.

Besides, the drive goes a bit quicker than normal at my speed, and I continue to shoot more questions her way, picking apart everything I’ve yet to know about her. The questions are only a short blip of the trip; most of it’s in silence, giving me a chance to think and focus on the road.

My hand on her thigh is two-fold: for my own selfish pleasures, but to also feel for any stiffening in her body or sudden changes. She handles the drive well, and I catch her even smiling a few times.

While I ignore how fucking *right* this is. Once, when I was an idealistic child, I pictured whoever I’d find myself shackled to also enjoying my own hobbies. Back then, they were much safer. Back then was before I realized how exhausting a marriage could be and chased the kind my parents had. But this…this is right, and though many instincts demand I turn around and return Ariella to our bed, safe inside the mansion where I can stick a hundred guards at the door, there’s a selfish eagerness to have her with me.

Once we make it to the city, I weave between traffic and listen for any changes in her breathing, but she remains calm and seemingly unaffected. Gazing out the window like we’re going for a casual, leisurely Sunday drive rather than speeding through a city at eleven at night, until finally reaching the long Brooklyn road often used for racing. Cops enjoy breaking the races up but once they notice plates, they leave us alone.

I slow as we approach, warning her yet again, “Stay close. Caladin will be here too. He’s the only other person allowed near you.”

At the start of the next road, I’m halted by a thick crowd. They mingle, shouting with beer bottles lifted in the air. The smell of cigarettes and weed sneak through the car’s filters. At the sight of my car, a few turn, screaming unknown, drunken statements.

I park beside the only other car here. A Subaru WRX that, based on the number of add-on lights strung to the outside of the car, the owner spends more time making it look good than managing what’s beneath the hood.

Easy win.

Easier because I recognize the vehicle. Which means, I know who I'm racing even before Caladin breaks through the crowds to report my contender.

"Stay in the car," I order. "Just for a second." The crowd here isn't known for being stellar people.

Caladin cuts me off before I can reach her side, a hand coming up to block my way. "Hey," he lowers his voice to a murmur I barely hear over the crowd, "while we're alone. I looked into the accident like you asked. Corsetti gave me access to Stefano De Falco's phone records. I didn't think he'd be dumb enough to contact the driver directly, and I was right. One number came up the most, and the owner went by the name Gage. Same mercenary that Rafael Corsetti warned me about. Said he was the leader of some gang, but he and his brother killed all their men. Anyway, so I had Gage's phone records pulled, looking into everyone he's ever called, seeing who's alive and dead. Two are still alive. And one…one's credit card records showed on the date of the accident, he booked a car rental. So I had the rental place's systems hacked." Caladin pauses, rolling his lips together as his eyes dart to Ariella who, shockingly, remained in the car. "He rented out a white van on that day. Not sure how he got out of the manslaughter charge, but it doesn't matter anymore because we found him, man. We're tracking him, and Corsetti's hunting his ass as I speak. We'll have him soon."

And this is why Caladin is my best tracker. No one else would have been able to put all that together *and* find him. His news might be the second-best thing to happen to me this week, next to fucking my wife.

I slap him on the arm as I continue to Ariella's side. "Thanks. We'll talk more later. Let me know when you get him."

Keeping myself at an angle, I let Ariella out of the car, readjusting her dress after she stands before the slithering fuckers around us see anything. But first, I back her into the car, crowding her.

"Kiss for good luck?"

Smiling, she gives me a kiss so heated, my cock demands bending her over the car right this instance.

"What do I get if I win?"

Her eyes flick between us, staring meaningfully at my waist. Her look can mean numerous things but as long as it ends with both of us naked, I

don’t give a fuck. She lifts her hands between us and signs slowly. I think I make the sentence out correctly, and if I do, then there’s no way in hell I’m losing this race, but still, I verify.

“I win and you’ll tie me up?”

She nods, smirking.

“And if I lose?”

Nothing, she replies with her hands.

Grinning, I pull her away from the car so I can shut the door, while still using my body to block her from everyone.

“Custom says I talk to my opponent. Share a few words. More bets will be made. Give the crowd a show I don’t actually care for, and then we begin. And once again, *sirena*, stay fucking close.” I squeeze her hand, emphasizing my next words. “I’m not releasing you so don’t bother trying.”

She nods again, this time her expression serious, and sticks tight to my arm, her other hand even coming down on top of mine. It comforts me, her touch. Provides a strength I didn’t realize I was missing.

Caladin takes her in, and whistles low. “My, oh my, Mrs. Rossi, you look like an absolute doll. Remind me to send whoever designed that dress a raise because it’s well-deserved.” Casting a wink my way, the asshole adds, “If Erico isn’t giving you what you want, come find me.”

Throwing more weight into my step, I shove my shoulder into his as I pass him, shutting him up with an *oof* but still, he only chortles, completely aware of the pointless jealousy he’s provoking in me.

The sky cracks, lightning threatening to crash down. For now, it backs my annoyance for my cousin.

Despite Caladin’s joke, he takes up Ariella’s left side, winking at her before his expression shifts into one that’s serious and deadly. The one that says not to piss him off. The trio of us walk toward the crowd as a large fucker shoves through it.

Blake Anders.

“Anders,” I greet, wiping the shit-eating grin off his face. Every time we race, I win, so I don’t know why he bothers.

His eyes dive to the woman clinging to my arm and rakes her body in a way too slow and leisurely for my liking. One more second and he’ll lose his eyes, and then he’ll definitely lose the race. “Who’s she? Tell me she’s the loser’s prize. Because if so, I won’t even bother turning on my car. You can have this one if I get her.”

Ariella presses close to me and while every word from his disgusting mouth has me wanting to murder him, I'm glad she comprehends why I don't want her wandering freely.

"This is the *Famiglia's* newest queen and if you don't show some fucking respect, Anders, you deal with me. You might be a gang's ringleader, but I rule the fucking country. This is *my* city. *My* drugs you're dealing. Don't forget that."

His eyes narrow into slits that do nothing for me. This is his game. He lords over his own minions so much, he forgets his place sometimes. Racing him is always good because it's a reminder of where he belongs in the hierarchy. The bottom.

"Right." His voice grates, his arms crossing over his chest like he's aiming to make a statement. "Word did spread, yeah, that you gained a new whore by your side. Surprised you haven't killed her yet. She seems a little gentle for you, Rossi."

"He's trying to get beneath your skin," Caladin murmurs. "Don't let him. In fact—" He cuts himself off as he strides toward the observing crowd, his arms rising, his voice booming with unclear words. Either way, he gains the crowd's attention and after the show, money starts flying. Words and threats, curses and dares, all about the race. For good measure, he slaps Anders' shoulder, knocking him back into the crowd of admirers.

With him gone for the moment, Ariella looks at me, her eyes a bit wider. Good. So she sees that life with me isn't all mansions and swimming pools.

Having her here, a bright flash of white amongst so much black and leather, makes me want to bundle her up and return home, to her safe bubble, where none of this exists. Yet at the same time, I want to release her hand and watch her claim her place in the underground's throne as the *Famiglia*'s queen. I'm a crime lord and she's a crime lord's wife, and with the chance, I bet she'd fucking excel at dealing with even a fraction of what I do.

She reaches up and cups my face, bringing me down to her height where she lays a claiming kiss. Those of the crowd still paying us attention observes—observes her own claim on me.

"Give Caladin a few minutes. He's amping up the crowd after that showdown. A bunch of bullshit, but people's cash will flow quicker now. Then we'll start."

I do what I always do, and linger by the edges. Normally people avoid coming too close because they know better. Sometimes women will try to approach, only to be sent away with a gesture. There's no one in this crowd I'd let near my cock, even in my pre-marriage days.

When the cheers increase, I know Caladin's nearly finished. He pushes back through, winking as the crowd disperses to the edges of the city road, on the cement to make room for Anders and me. There's a white stop line a few feet away, always used as the starting line.

"Pot's bigger," Caladin announces, skipping back to our sides. "More than normal are betting against you. They think she'll," he nods to Ariella, "distract you. Then the other half are motivated by the show."

"That's precisely what'll happen." Ariella *is* a distraction but not for the reasons they think. I'll lose the race, money be damned, before I lose her to her traumatic memories that racing could dredge up. But if she's okay, then I'll win the race and won't stop driving until we're back home and I'm buried between her legs.

"Good luck, not that you need it." He heads nearby for his bike, where he's about to drive the stretch of the race toward the finish line. The crowd often splits themselves between watching the pre-race and watching the ending—catching the winner. Caladin places himself at both ends for the bets.

Anders breaks through the crowd, his arms spread to make himself bigger. "Last chance, baby. Climb in my car and experience a winner."

A growl works its way up my throat, alongside a comment, if it wasn't for Ariella pulling from my arm. First, I reach for her, but then she passes him with a haughty look and climbs right back into our car.

Ignoring him, I get in too. Anders drives his vehicle to the starting line where a woman stands, gripping a white flag. He leans out his window to talk with her, which means I only have a moment.

Once I'm situated and my car's on, I cup Ariella's face, ensuring she sees the seriousness sketched onto mine. "One sign of distress and I stop the car and we go home. I hate that you're making me do this."

She smiles and brings her hands up, making a sign I've learned only two nights ago, and even mouths along. *I'm fine.*

Searching her eyes, I seek the lie. And find none.

"I know you are. Well then," I release her, putting the car into drive so I can move it to the starting line, "buckle up."

Ariella

Erico's concern for my well-being might be the element of a relationship I've always craved, but his worries are pointless. Speed didn't cause Mom's death; a villain did. An evil stepfather who used her, me, and my sister for his own gains. He paid someone to ram us into traffic. The accident occurred from a standstill.

That's not what's happening today. Erico racing a guy won't bring flashbacks.

I think. I hope.

Either way, his concern, the look in his eyes, only makes me love him more.

Wait…

As Erico brings the car in line with his opponent's, I feel like I'm being removed from the moment. Here but not *here*. Physically present, but not mentally. My mind is drifting, to the past, present, and future. To every moment with Erico I've experienced and every moment still to come.

I think I've felt it for a while but never put words to it. Never wanted to until I *knew*. Until I felt safe enough not to have this happiness yanked from me. Marrying Erico was my way to find a smidge of happiness in this mafia lifestyle I was dragged into, but at the same time, I never would have believed we'd become *this*. A duo.

“Ready?” His question brings me back.

The engine revs. Erico glances out my window, toward his opponent, who’s grinning and revving his own engine.

My husband doesn’t even look like the mafia boss I’ve come to know. He’s carefree, almost younger. Right down to his ripped jeans and Henley. An outfit that made me drool upon leaving the mansion. Erico in a suit—sexy. Erico casual—mouth-watering. In a way, he reminds me of when he came out to the pool in only shorts yesterday. That ended well, and ideally, tonight will too.

A woman stands between the vehicles and she lifts the flag, stealing my attention. I’ve seen enough movies to know what this means.

Erico stares straight down the dark road. Despite being in the city, most of the streetlights are off, which makes me wonder if this is set-up as such. Strange, but perhaps it’s to hide the race. I would have thought these were done on back roads, but what do I know?

Erico reaches for my hand and places it overtop the shifter before covering it with his own. His fingers flex over the shifter, over me, including me in his experience. His eyes narrow on the road and even his mouth flattens, every ounce of his focus on the race.

The sky crackles again, only this time, instead of the threat of rain like all the previous cracks, the cars are slammed with large, heavy raindrops. The wipers automatically switch on to clean the windshield, and none of the observers seem to care about getting drenched. Guess when their money’s on the line, water doesn’t scare them.

“Fuck,” he mutters, and I know why. While it’s summer with hot temperatures, the rain won’t be icy, but can still result in worsening visibility.

The woman, now a blurred image through the front window, lowers the flag.

I’m shoved back into my seat with the speed the car takes off at. Erico moves the gearshift quickly, effortlessly, my hand in his control. The road around us blurs, becoming black. There’s nothing describable around me. As fast as rain pounds at the car, it’s sliding off the sides, speed rendering the wipers useless.

This feels fucking amazing.

I laugh.

This is why he does this. This sensation of flight, of freedom, it's ethereal.

I don't stop laughing.

Erico glances over, his expression wondering if I've lost my mind. The look doesn't last long because he focuses again, his hand tightening around mine. "We'll win together, *la mia sirena.*"

We'll win. Inclusion. A simple but powerful thing.

I glance out my window, searching for his opponent through the heavy downpour. The front of the other car is in line with Erico's back passenger side, which means we're winning if our speed maintains.

He hadn't said how long the race goes for, but I never want it to end.

We pass a cluster of buildings at the same time his opponent falls back. So far back, he's behind us. Erico likely sees him in his rearview mirror, but I watch through the side mirror. It hadn't felt like our speed increased, but maybe it did. We're winning.

The headlights get closer, the other car speeding up. But he's behind us. Not trying to go around us.

Erico, look in your mirror. It's in my head, my words on the tip of my tongue. He looks too close, like he's about to hit us—

"Mom…" I reach over, turning the music down. "Mom, I think someone's about to hit us."

Closer…The vehicle is white. A van. I can't make out the driver due to the angles. Still not slowing…

"Mom!" —

He's still not moving over. I focus through the headlights, catching the guy's grin at the precise second everything in my head clears.

When my trust for Erico emerges, and the fear for his life consumes me. For *our* lives. For something to ruin, to end, all the goodness we've been experiencing, and I can't allow that.

An engine revving.

Crash!

Metal scraping against metal.

Tires squealing.

Erico's car jerks, like it's been bumped.

Metal scraping against metal.

Mom screaming—No!

New memories replace the other ones. New fears.

Everything in my head shatters with the next flash of headlights.

When the car—

"ERICO!"

He immediately swerves to the left, narrowly avoiding the hit from his opponent at the precise second the other car slams forward and disappears down the road. Was it all a ploy to win and I just caused Erico the race?

No. I feel it in my gut. It was too similar.

Erico downshifts, breaks, and swivels the car onto the sidewalk, the wet cement gliding against the car's thin, sports tires. It takes us to the grassy stretch lining the road. For a moment, we're tilted, and then flat, parked in the centre of the grass.

Between heavy breaths, both of us trying to make sense of what just occurred, Erico lurches from the car, coming around to my side and yanks me from it. I'm in his arms, perched on the hot hood of the car, his head buried in my neck. We're soaked instantly, the water washing away our near-deaths. It gives energy, drenching us with *life*.

"Holy fuck," I breathe. "I think he tried to…"

I'm talking.

I laugh. A bit maniacal, disbelieving. I'm *laughing*. *Oh, my god, I've spoken to him*. I did what I've been dreaming of for days. The walls around my heart crumbled enough to allow him inside, the trust I've been feeling for a while now becoming obvious.

The fear of losing him.

Everything came to a full circle. Yelling my mother's name was the last word I spoke when I was "normal." Yelling Erico's name is what allowed me to open up to him.

Both in similar circumstances.

He cups my face in both hands, his eyes searching my face, like he's seeing me for the first time. Maybe he is. Maybe he's uncovered a piece of the old me. The rain dousing us changes nothing; he doesn't blink as water drips from his lashes.

"Ariella, your voice…You saved us, baby."

"I-I spoke." It's getting easier now. "He tried to—I spoke. I didn't think, Erico, I just reacted. All I could think about was him crashing into us. I had to warn you."

"You warned me," he repeats, disbelief making his voice a half pitch higher.

I stare over his shoulder, in the direction his opponent disappeared to. Whatever happened hadn't ended the same way my first accident did. I'm alive.

We're alive.

I shouted and no one died. I warned him and *saved* us.

I didn't lose him.

I didn't lose myself to the darkness.

I *found* myself.

My giggles shift into tears and the next thing I know is I'm pulling his face to mine. Or he's pulling me to him. Not sure which, but our lips meet like the storm above us. Desperate and hungry, full of control and drive, each of us fighting for dominance.

I'll never admit it to him, but that was scary. Not in the way he believes though. I *did* have a flashback, but the speed had nothing to do with it.

My hands push up his soaked shirt, hands petting over the wet, smooth skin beneath. I want him like this. I want him *now*. Maybe it's a shock response. Maybe it's lust. Maybe it's my body reacting to the storm overhead.

All I know is he feels the same way.

"Ariella, I gotta feel you."

"Take me." My voice sounds strange, unused. Even to me. Even when alone, I stopped talking to myself. Stopped singing. Became a shadow because it was easier that way.

Perhaps I've discovered another piece of my husband, or maybe it was what happened, but Erico's demeanor switches. He yanks me off the car's hood, spins me around, and with his palm to the back of my neck, shoves me down. My panties are shoved to my knees with his free hand, and a finger swipes through my core.

Moaning, I spread my legs as wide as my panties allow for. The heavy rain feels heated, though it might be the warm car beneath me. It soaks my back and makes my ass cold and wet the second Erico flips my dress up.

He undoes his jeans, lines his hard cock up, and plunges inside with a single thrust. Filled to the brim, the pleasure immediately robbing me of breath, my nails scrape uselessly against the wet metal of his car. The storm above, the thunder crashes, matched to my breaths and his thrusts.

"Fuck, that was close. Never again." *Thrust.* "After today, I'm locking you inside our bedroom. I refuse to lose you."

In his statement, I hear, *I love you.*

“Erico.” I groan, his thrusts getting punishing. On the verge of painful but this man would never physically hurt me.

“Say my name, *sirena*. Grant another one of my dreams, I beg of you.”

“Erico.” I’ll say it again and again and again. And when my core clenches, when the orgasm sweeps roughly through me and I bow my back, fighting to get closer, for him to be deeper inside me. To be what the storm is. All-encompassing, energizing, and renewing. “Erico, I’m coming.”

He bends over my back, changing the angle entirely, and I cry into the car’s hood, my head unable to be held up any longer. His mouth traces the curve of my ear as he thrusts a final time, growling when my pussy tightens around him.

“Feel me. Let me hear you. No one’s coming near you again, Ariella, I fucking promise.”

The orgasm slams into me, my cries mingled into the heavy rainfall. My insides are filled with his heat before he slumps onto my back, his pants in my ear.

“I can’t believe that happened.”

“Which part?” He positions himself upright again, and my core is emptied when he pulls from my body.

“Every part.” I haven’t had two seconds to process it, being swept up in the chaos of the moment.

For one, I spoke. My voice worked again. Without hesitation, and even afterwards. When Erico slides my panties up my legs and lowers my dress, I stare at him. After tonight, I can’t return to being silent. Trauma memories aside, he’s made new, better ones in my head, and they’re what I’ll focus on.

And then, two, the fact we were almost ran off the road by his opponent.

Lastly, being bent over the hood of his car and fucked roughly.

He follows my gaze to the hood, only rather than the appreciation and admiration I’m feeling, his mouth slips open. His hand rubs the back of his mouth, his eyes saying something else. “Fuck. I pinned you down. Fuck!” His hands shift to his hair. He turns around, his back tense. Worry emits from every part of him and I’m taken back to when I recounted previous sexual experiences and it all dawns on me.

“Hey.” I reach for him, shaking my head, pulling on his arm until he faces me again. “Don’t you dare apologize. That was exactly what I wanted.

What I needed."

Still looking doubtful, he asks, "You better not be lying. You're not hurt or…" He trails off, but I can imagine the numerous endings to his question.

"No. No, I guess…I don't know. It's different with you. Maybe with you, I enjoy both the control and submission."

He yanks me against his chest again, his lips smashing into mine. Rain flavours the kiss and I pull at his clothing again, wanting to do it all over.

"As long as you never lie to me. Always tell me the truth so I know. I can't fix shit if I don't know."

The sound of a motorcycle interrupts my response, and through the rain, Caladin appears. He parks his bike at the edge of the road and hops off, running toward us, his feet slipping over the grass.

"Holy fuck, what the hell happened? Are you two okay?" His eyes dart between us and I wonder if he can tell. "Anders finished the race, took the money, and sped away like his ass was on fire. The fact you lost is one thing but you would have been right behind him. I waited a whole five minutes before coming to find you."

It was only five minutes.

"Find him," Erico commands, his tone colder and harsher than minutes ago. "He tried to drive us off the road and I want to know why."

Caladin jerks back, clearly surprised. "What the hell would he do that for? You've raced him twice in the past and he's never pulled that kind of shit."

"Exactly. Find him. He'll be answering for it."

Caladin nods and takes a single step back, first checking, "You two okay, though? No injuries."

"We're fine."

We're better than fine, in my opinion.

Caladin accepts Erico's response and hops back on his bike, turning around and zooming back the way he came.

Once alone again, Erico leads me to the passenger seat. Instantly, the leather seat is soaked from my clothing. Erico takes his spot too and starts the car, driving it slowly over the grass, the cement, and the road. The low car's bumper thumps with the movements, making me wince with the fact it's likely getting scraped up.

"Well, that was fun. Your next race, I'd like to do that again, but maybe let me see you win."

He shoots me a scathing look, not amused with my teasing.

Erico

For the remainder of the night, my selfishness keeps me in bed with Ariella. The urge to hunt Blake Anders is nearly as strong as the desire to hear her cry out my name over and over.

Maybe it’s shock, but I don’t think I’ve processed that, after all this time, she’s trusts me enough to talk to me. Having no idea exactly how trauma works, I accepted I never would. Maybe she needed to manage the loss more—I don’t know. Della was the only lucky one of us, understandably so, and I accepted that I’d be clinging to the single word she shouted in her dreams.

When she yelled my name in the car, pure instincts had me checking every angle around us, spotting Anders tailgating me, and swerving to safety in less than a blink of an eye. I despise myself for being so focused on the road and getting us through the storm, I hadn’t noticed what he was doing.

But that was it, I assumed. My name as a warning, and I’d get nothing further, but then she laughed and continued to talk. Screamed my name as she came on my cock, while bent over my car, a fantasy I hadn’t realized I had until that moment.

Being home is different. I think. Again, no idea how mental health diagnoses work so I’ve spent the night terrified, that was it. A trauma

response to an almost-accident based on a previous one and she'd return to being silent.

Therefore, with Caladin hunting Anders, I've been selfish and had her coming over and over, if only to hear my name from her lips as many times as her body was physically able to gift me.

I started out dominating her, stealing four orgasms back-to-back, but ended with me on my back and begging for my own release. This woman is fucking perfect. Once given her power back, she's happy to share it again. Exactly like I need, like I want.

So pulling from her in the morning is shitty, but I was woken with a message from Caladin, stating he's caught Anders with support from some of our men. That was an hour ago, but I ignored my job for this.

Watching Ariella wake up in my second home.

Given that we were drenched last night, I took her to my condo instead of driving all the way back to the Hamptons. There's nothing here; my apartment kept very basic and boring, but it was a safe place for the night. Besides, it's thrilling to bring my wife to yet another one of my homes, another place she's the only woman to be in here, other than the housekeeper occasionally cleaning.

Ariella stretches, her back arching and pushing her breasts into the side of my body. A sleepy smile graces her face as she blinks her eyes slowly open, finding me.

"Morning." *Please verbally reply.* I've become addicted to her voice and not hearing it again is unfathomable.

"Good morning."

She's still here. I don't know why, or how, or if this is how it'll be with everyone, but a part of me doesn't care. In fact, I'd love nothing more to be one of the few she'll speak to.

I can't tell her everything in my head, so I show her, by rolling her over and kissing her. Our tongues tangle, our legs melding together. My cock wakes up, nestling with her heat.

But then my phone's vibrations cut through the air and I curse. She laughs, tapping the back of my shoulder until I lift off her. "Stop ignoring your job. You're the Boss, in case you've forgotten. Go do your things. Sounds like you're needed."

I roll off her but not before bringing my finger down to her core. "I am needed. To make my wife come."

“And your wife needs to have her insides left alone for a day. You’ve put them to work last night.” She sits up, groaning, her hand resting on her stomach. “And apparently my abs too.”

“Good. Means you’ll feel me for the rest of the day. Speaking of,” I glance at the time, “since I’m gone for the day, and this place doesn’t have anything for you, I’ve asked Jack to come for you in an hour. He’ll drive you to the mansion. Then later this afternoon, the *Famiglia*’s doctor is stopping by to check on you.”

I texted him when I woke earlier. Speaking again is one thing, but the fact her mind switched tells me she needs support more than I can provide.

With that announcement, I disappear into the attached closet, much smaller than my mansion’s, and return dressed in a suit to find her pouting.

“Erico, I’m fine.”

“Neither of us have medical degrees, so I agree to disagree until a professional reassures us.” I approach the bed, dropping a quick kiss on her lips. “Caladin needs me. Shower, dress. Jack will text you in about an hour. I’ll see you back at home later.”

Caladin’s propped against the shut door of the warehouse, picking at his nails mindlessly with a knife. At my approach, he kicks off it. “Make this quick or else we’re gonna need to start putting these fuckers somewhere else. Because by tomorrow, we’ll have her mother’s murderer.” He grins. “Yeah, Corsetti called. Said our intel and coordinates checked out. I’m taking men up North to the border to get him tomorrow morning.”

“Perfect. For now,” I roll up my sleeves and snatch the blade from his grip, “we get answers about last night.”

He follows me into the dimly lit warehouse, where Anders is chained. Caladin shifted the trajectory of the chains so rather than him bolted to the floor, his arms are lifted over his head, a bandana shoved into his mouth. His eyes widen upon my entry and he stumbles back a step, his arms yanking on the chains as he tries to balance on his toes.

“He was buggin’ the fuck out of me,” Caladin comments. “Kept screaming bullshit so I shut him up.”

I approach and whatever he's trying to say gets louder, his shouting muffled by the cloth in his mouth. I jerk it around his neck and he sucks in three gulps of air. "Rossi—Mr. Rossi, I swear, I was coerced!"

Somehow, I knew it wouldn't be long until he squealed. He boasts a big game for the races, but he's certainly no mercenary. Not a criminal in that sense, which makes gaining answers more pressing.

I angle the blade until it's pointing over his heart; a threat he won't misunderstand. Fear will have him spewing everything, believing it'll save his soul. "Talk. Everything you know. *Now.*"

He bobs his head in an almost animated way. "I was paid. Five thousand dollars showed up on my doorstep yesterday morning with a note to smash into you. Said once the job was done, I'd get another five."

Fuck. Someone out there wants me dead then. With the speed involved in these races, whoever set this up, is aware that being shoved off the road makes death a high likelihood. The car would lose control, the buildings easy to crash into, the car flippable.

Cocking a brow, I ask, "You obeyed the directionless order when you could have brought this to me and saved your life?"

His skin pales and his eyes dart from both Caladin and me then back. He jerks in the chains, angling himself away from the knife, and tears fill his eyes. He's a pathetic, blubbering mess. "Man, you know any animosity I feel toward ya is just for the races. Friendly competition and all. I don't want you dead!"

"Yet you listened to the command."

"Have you met *you* people? If I didn't listen to the order, I'd be dead too!"

Maybe. Or the greedy fucker wanted an easy payday and didn't use his measly brain to think admitting the note and cash to me would have given him an even better payout. "How'd that work out for you?" With the knife, I spin it, gesturing to the warehouse. "You still ended up here."

He jerks in the chains again, trying to skitter back, only for the metal to pin him to the spot. "Dude, let me go. I'll give you the money, the note. I'll hand it all over. Just let me fuckin' go." His tone drops to a plea, his pathetic tone nearly laughable.

"My wife was in the car," I state with a deadly, flat tone. He's not getting out of here—truth or otherwise—for the dangers he put her in.

“There are no second chances, Anders.” I take two steps, coming within a foot of him.

“Man,” he sobs, jerking roughly again. His legs kick out, trying to hit me, but getting nowhere. “Dude, let me go. I’m sorry. You’re both alive so it worked out.”

“We wouldn’t be if you succeeded. If *she* didn’t warn me. I’m sorry, Anders,” I say although my tone implies no empathy—nor do I feel it at all, “but to try to take her from me is an act against the *Famiglia* and no one survives such a betrayal.”

With a single thrust, I jam it into his heart. The skin squelches, his eyes widen before the light fades, and his body drops, slumping and jangling the chains. I release the knife’s hilt, leaving it inside his body, and wipe my hands on my pants after the cleanest death I’ve probably ever bestowed. He’s lucky.

“Didn’t drag that out at all,” Caladin murmurs, his lips pursing. “Didn’t want to take his offer up on getting the note? See if we can track whoever’s after you by handwriting.”

“Send someone to his apartment. Idiot probably left it lying around. Find his phone. Figure out everyone he’s been in contact with. It’s not a coincidence this happened last night of all times.”

Caladin’s already tapping at his phone, sending out orders. “You think they’re after Ariella.”

“Not sure. Timing’s weird. But no one knew she’d be with me. No one but you, and I know you’re not behind it.”

He shakes his head. “I’d die for you and her before I ordered your deaths. This is weird.”

Yeah, I mentally agree, instead ordering, “Get a cleaning crew in here. Dispose of him. Have the place prepared for our next guest.”

Caladin follows me out of the warehouse, his eyes narrowed and studying me. “No one’s safe from your *protect Ariella* rampage, are they? Means I should probably stay on her good side to not piss you off.”

“Do that.” I shut the warehouse door behind us, locking in the scent of death and betrayal, tainted with greed. “There’s one positive thing that came out from last night.”

“Fucking your wife against the car?” Caladin laughs. “You two were so damn obvious.”

“There’s that, but she spoke to me. Inside, when I said she warned me, she actually *warned* me.”

Humour slips off his face, his mouth forming an O. “Your mute wife is *speaking* now?”

“I don’t know how it works, but at least to me, yeah.” Just saying it out loud, hearing her voice in my head, causes me to smile. And has my cousin punching his fist to my arm, chuckling.

“Well, good for you, man. Good for *her*, I guess. I’m getting this isn’t any small feat.”

“No.” For her or me. Whatever the reason she was able to speak, it was the acclimation of trust, of…something. Of *us* and it’s a gift I’ll cherish every day.

He shakes his head and backs up, nearing the building again. “Well, I’ll wait here until people arrive to remove Anders’ body. Then I’m taking a couple to the border with me, if you’d like to join. Or,” he waggles his brows suggestively, “too busy wrapped up in your wife’s voice?”

“Work, actually. I have to drive to a few of the clubs to complete some rounds. Haven’t been to any of our locations in a while. Besides, it keeps me away from the house for now, while Doc checks on Ariella.”

“Gotcha.”

I drive off, without looking into the rear-view mirror. Without looking back at that man’s corpse.

Killing a man wasn’t the most striking part of my day so far. Learning that someone wants me or Ariella dead—or both—is.

Ariella

"Hey," I greet as soon my sister answers the phone.

Seated by the fish tank, watching the multi-coloured creatures go around and around, I'm waiting for Erico's family doctor to arrive. Entirely unnecessary, but at this point, I'm so used to every variety of professional, what's another one to add to my roster?

"Hey!" she replies, her voice almost tinging with a question. "You called *me*…and you sound well."

"I feel good." Better than in a long time. The darkness hasn't creeped up at all today.

Yet.

Stupid annoying, inner voice. It's entirely incorrect. The nice feeling *will* stick.

"That's…great." She chuckles. "So Erico's treating you better than the beginning?"

"Yeah, that's actually what I called about." I pause, my thoughts formulating into statements that'll make sense for us both. "Della, I managed to *talk* to him."

Silence.

Three seconds pass.

Ten seconds.

“Della?”

“That’s…wow. Not what I was expecting you to say. So, like…you…like…what?” For once, my articulate sister is so tongue-tied, I laugh.

“I really don’t know. Every time I tried to in the past, my throat gets clogged. Like I can’t force it out. The memory of—”

Crash!

Metal scraping against metal.

Tires squealing.

“Anyway,” I continue, without losing myself down that train of thought, “it was different this time.”

“This time,” she repeats, still in that questioning tone. “What made *this* time so different?”

If I admit everything, Della’s protectiveness will return and she’ll freak out that I joined him for the race. Admitting *why* and what got me to speak would mean telling the rest.

I go with a partial truth: “I don’t know how it works, or what was in my head. I called his name, and then…kept going. That was yesterday. Late last night, I guess. This morning, I woke almost convinced I dreamed the entire thing.” I pause, thinking over my next words, my excitement for them not tapered down. “I’m able to talk to my husband. I *want* to talk to him.”

After all that, she only replies with two words. Words that are already facts to me. “You’re happy.”

The sun smashes through the final dimness.

“I am.”

“You care for him. I’ve never heard you sound like this.” Her tone is edged, concerned almost.

“I do. I think. You sound weird, Della.”

“I’m just—I’m happy for you.” With a lower voice, she continues, “When you volunteered and we fought, remember how I kept reminding you of the whole nine-yards thing you always dreamed of? The husband, the kids, the house. But your counter-argument was that due to Mom’s choices, our futures changed too drastically for you to live that once-possible life. Despite everything, it’s working out.”

We’re no love match like you and Nico, but yeah, we’re getting there.

“He’s trying. More now than the beginning. At first, he didn’t want a relationship, but it’s not like that anymore. In this fucked-up world that we found ourselves in, Della, we made something of it. Mom would have

wanted this for us, I think. You found love in an unlikely place, but Nico would burn the world to keep you safe. And I—" I stop. Admitting I care for Erico is one thing, but the rest seems too soon.

I almost expect her to push me, but my sister only makes an appreciative noise right as a knock sounds through the entrance of the house. Carlotta rushes from upstairs and somehow, manages to get her aging body to the front door all before I even stand from the couch.

"Gotta go," I mumble into the phone's speaker. "Meeting." Then I hang up as the door opens and Carlotta is waving the visitor inside.

The *Famiglia* doctor looks nothing like the Corsettis'. While the Corsettis' is an older man with a receding hairline and a grandfatherly smile, Erico's is probably about twenty years younger, fit, with all his hair. Blond with a spattering of dark strands.

He shakes Carlotta's hand with a charming smile and then approaches me, his arm stretching. I take it, open my mouth in greeting—

Crash!

Metal scraping against metal.

Tires squealing.

Hm. Maybe Dr. Shappo was right. Maybe it's a trust thing. A comfort thing. And Erico's made his way inside my very tight circle.

When my mouth clamps shut, he simply smiles and gestures toward the couches behind us. "Please, don't strain yourself trying to talk. Dr. Shappo from Montreal forwarded your file to me and I've read it over, even into your time at the medical centre. SLP, psychiatrist, psychologist, GP; they really threw everyone at you, huh?"

I nod once in agreement, uncertain how to respond. The doctor drops in the chair across from me and roots through his leather bag before retrieving a notebook. He rips a sheet of paper from it and hands me a pen.

"To reply, if you'd like. My name is Dr. Rancott. I've been with the *Famiglia* for quite a long time, and have been looking forward to meeting the newest Mrs. Rossi."

Right away, I scribble my name onto the paper and jab my nail into it, shooting him a meaningful look that means *refer to me as this.*

He smiles, the skin around his eyes wrinkling slightly. "Of course, Ariella. Well, Mr. Rossi mentioned you're not interested in further counselling, which, after reading, I suppose I understand. Tired of it all?"

I nod.

“I did have a phone call the other day with Dr. Shappo though, and he mentioned his theories about why your sister is the only one you feel comfortable enough to speak with. Did he ever mention this to you?” When I nod, he asks, “And how do you feel about it?”

I shrug, not really wanting to delve into theories, but do agree, now more than ever, with the previous doctor.

“Fair enough. Well, I’ve come to check up on you after yesterday, and to introduce myself, in case down the road, you do wish for extra services. Then I won’t be a stranger to you. Mr. Rossi didn’t share many details, other than you were nearly hit by a vehicle.”

He didn’t tell the stranger that I spoke to him. I don’t know why, but it makes me feel better. If the doctor knew, he’d be interested in why Erico’s added to the list alongside my sister.

I scribble on the paper.

I’m fine. Erico avoided the hit

Once he reads it, the distracted look in his eyes indicates something else. He won’t say it though. He won’t point out the similarities between yesterday and the accident that began all this. There’s more similarities than Dr. Rancott’s even aware of.

He flips through his notebook, murmuring, “There’s a few things I’d like to check out, and to draw some blood.”

Why? I mouth. Needles and me, we’re not enemies, but if I can avoid giving blood, that would be great.

“Because it seems like it’s been a few years since your last blood test, according to your file, and it’s standard procedure for the *Famiglia*. Especially the mother of our future Boss.”

Right. Sometimes, being wrapped up in Erico and swimming and my music, I forget the real reason I’m here. To be a wife—to host parties and create Erico’s heir.

Seeing no other way, I lay the paper off to the side and shuffle toward the edge of the couch, indicating for him to begin. He reaches in his bag for gloves and comes closer with a vial.

A few minutes later, he’s pulling a needle from my arm, my hiss loud in the otherwise silent room. He’s probed my muscles and nerves and asked

me a million questions about my cycle, which I've managed to answer most of them.

Irregular periods—even on the birth control pill, my cycle was only less sporadic than when not on it.

Hot flashes—since puberty. I've come to assume they were a part of my period, when I do have one.

He's collected two vials of blood and caps them both off, wrapping them in a cloth which he places in his bag.

"Two because I'll be running quite a few tests. Otherwise, everything else looks good." He undoes the torniquet around my upper arm and dabs the small dot of red the needle left behind. "Band-Aid?"

I shake my head.

He drops a business card on the couch beside me. "Mr. Rossi has my number, but if you need or want to get a hold of me directly, call or text any time of the day." He gathers his things and tips his head. "If that is all, goodbye and have a nice day. It was lovely to meet the *Famiglia*'s newest member."

The moment he walks away, Carlotta appears from down the hallway, as though she was waiting nearby. She lets Dr. Rancott out and then offers, "Lunch? Build your sugars back up?"

Erico hasn't been in contact all day, reminding me a lot of how marriage was at first. Sitting in the music room seems lonelier now than before. Without Erico's visit, I'm playing for only myself and it's more boring than it should be.

The last page in my notebook has a particular song I've poured endless hours into, writing it for Della and Nico's wedding. It was supposed to be my gift to them because it was something Della and I grew up dreaming about, even when she adamantly refused to ever be married at all.

I didn't sing it though. Didn't even play it. The days leading up to the wedding, the dark clouds got grimmer and the realization of how stupid I am crashed down. Playing a song for my sister in front of all those people after the wedding planner spent days sourcing the best DJ. All those people

watching. Judging. Singing was out, especially when I couldn't even sing for myself.

Even before my interest in piano, I sang often. Everything and anything. Any little tune in a store, if I didn't know the words, and sometimes, I'd invent the lyrics. After the accident, everything musical went away.

All the music notes in my life faded. Life isn't a musical, so there was little point.

Considering singing, even when no one was around, was impossible. The single time I attempted, late at night, alone in my room, I couldn't. My self-hating, dark hole was so deep, it felt impossible to drag myself out of.

'Maybe you're unable to sing to yourself because you lost faith in yourself. You feel like, after your mother's death, there's nothing else, but you're wrong, Ariella. There's you.*'*

Those words became her parting ones because Yasmine stood up, gave me a one-armed hug, and left my room of the medical centre.

Ironically, that became her final visit. Unknown to either of us at the time, because weeks later, everything with her father went down.

If I could learn to sing for myself again, perhaps I could sing for Erico.

I think he'd appreciate it. Maybe even *like* it.

It's something I could work toward. To sing for not only him, not only me, but *us*.

My phone vibrates, moving it an inch over the piano top, and I grab it quickly, heart hammering with hope it's Erico's deep, possessive rumble I'll hear on the other end. Instead, the screen flashes with Dr. Rancott's name. After he visited this morning, I imputed his number so I'd never lose it.

"Mrs. Rossi—Ariella, it's Dr. Rancott," he greets the second I answer. "I'm sorry to be calling you so soon, but I had a rush order put on a few tests this morning, on your bloodwork, and I received some distressing results."

Ice freezes my nerves. Dread becomes everything I focus on, clinging to the kind doctor's concerned tone.

Then he talks again, but my nerves are already ice. Which means, the only thing left is for them to shatter into thousands of pieces. Of sharp shards meant to stab, to protect myself from harm. But even wanting to do so is impossible when, in his next few statements, I lose everything.

Not only myself.

“Ariella…one of the tests was to check your follicle-stimulating hormone levels. They’re high. Higher than I’ve ever seen.”

He’s speaking literal science and I’m not following along, but I *know*. Without the definition, he’s already admitting something’s wrong with me. With my *hormones*. Hormones indicate a few things in a woman’s body, but the most prevalent—

I crumble. In the centre of the music room, with nothing to hold me up, my shaking knees drop me to the ground, right on top of the siren carpet.

“FSH is associated with women’s eggs production,” he continues hammering the life-changing news into my head. Like an ice pick—jab, jab, jab—in you go; sharp and meant to break apart ice until there’s nothing remaining. “The higher the trace of the hormone indicates a woman’s fertility chances. Matching your levels alongside some of the answers you provided about your cycle…”

I can’t listen.

My mask isn’t up. The emotions not hidden. Not here, while I’m alone. When the darkness can consume me in ways greater than it’s ever been before. Not only consume, but *destroy*.

And for once, I want it to. Desperately plead with the darkness to devour me whole, so I don’t have to live any longer.

This isn’t…this can’t be happening. Not now.

Everything good always ends. Right on time. Right when everything is *right* in my life.

“Mrs. Rossi, this *isn’t* over. I will have more tests ran until we get more concrete responses, but right now, based on your levels…Ariella, there’s a very low likelihood of conception. Your body doesn’t have enough of the hormone to produce eggs and—”

I hang up.

The phone slips through my hand and crashes to the floor.

The floor in which I drop into a ball, my forehead to the carpet.

The doctor says it’s not over, but it is. This reminds me of when I woke the morning after the accident, tried to speak, only to be bombarded with flashbacks and memories. That was when my stupid, useless brain stopped sending speech signals to my mouth.

Except this time, it’s not my speech. It’s not even my brain. It’s my *body* betraying me in the worst fucking way possible.

A part of me is broken.

Another part of me is broken.

You're a joke. Good things don't happen to people like you. You'll never be good enough for Erico.

There's the voices again, but this time, they're so correct, it makes me sick.

I'm not enough.

I'll never *be* enough.

I'm broken.

Useless.

My arms wrap around my middle—my useless stomach. A stomach that'll never stretch with a growing baby. The only other fucking thing I wanted in this world. A man to love me and a child I create.

Why is life so damn cruel? Was the accident, losing my mother, *and* my voice not enough?

I scream into the floor.

Pain. Agony.

Blackness. The darkness can consume me. At least, it's better than reality. Reality brings heartbreak.

I cry until the pain fades.

In other words…

…I don't stop crying.

Erico

“We have him. Bringing him to the warehouse now,” Caladin reports through my cell’s speaker. “Two for two. Anyone else I’m hunting in your wife’s name? Tell me now before I get comfortable on my couch.”

“Smartass. I’m finishing up shit and then I’ll be over.”

The moment I hang up, my phone rings again, my family’s doctor’s name flashing on the screen. He messaged earlier to inform me he met with Ariella, who’d been brought back to the mansion hours ago, but for him to be calling snakes a chill down my spine that will only thaw when he says what he needs to.

“What?” I bark with a bit more edge than I mean to. But my tone can’t help the discerning feeling of this moment.

“Sir.” His low voice is unlike him. Dr. Rancott is a very direct man, and is probably one of the few fuckers who shows no visible fear toward me. The shakiness in his tone, in that single greeting, the news can’t be positive.

And there’s only one person he’d be phoning about after today.

“Sir, I put in for a few rush tests on Mrs. Rossi’s bloodwork, and some of the tests came back. A lot look fine, except one thing. You should know —and I’ve already phoned her—but there’s extremely high levels of follicle-stimulating hormone appearing in her blood—”

“Get to it,” I grit, the pen in my other hand seconds away from being snapped in half. Not even from impatience, but with the fact that the moment he mentioned the term *hormones*, my heart stilled. “Skip the science talk.”

“Sir,” I almost hear the gulp in his voice, “her body can’t produce eggs. She won’t conceive. She won’t be able to give you an heir.”

“She knows?”

“Yes.”

I hang up, throwing my phone to the desk as the conversation replays in my head.

“She won’t conceive.”

“She won’t conceive.”

“She won’t conceive.”

Fuck.

“She won’t be able to give you an heir.”

She knows. Which means he phoned her. Which means she’s home dealing with these emotions alone. I wish I could know which emotions those were too. I couldn’t even pretend to understand her feelings.

Fuck, I don’t even know what *I’m* feeling.

Rage.

Blistering rage, burning every nerve in my body, every shred of sanity I’ve clung to my entire life. Killing, fighting, racing, dealing—all the adrenaline-induced activities I’ve thrived in, but none of them are even close to the sensation igniting me at this moment.

But it has nothing to do with the possibility of being without an heir.

It’s because *she’s* the one affected by this.

I’m up and out of my chair, phone in hand, shoving out of the bar’s back room I was using as an office for a day in between my visitations, within a second.

And then I’m home, with no recollection of the hours-long drive. I abandon my car in front of the mansion, engine running, and bolt inside, nearly bowling over Carlotta who lingers nearby.

She gestures toward her music room, so it’s the direction I rush in, her holler propelling me forward. “She’s been in there for hours, sobbing. She won’t let me in.”

When I’m within distance to her music room, her cry guts me. If there was any shred of my being still held together, she destroys it.

I shove open the door, spotting her in the centre of the carpet, curled up with her head forward. Her hair's a waterfall around her body and for the first time ever, I despise those red strands because they're protecting her from me.

I'm across the room within a second, dropping to my knees and tugging her into my arms. She shoulders against me at first, but then realizes who's grabbing her and she practically crawls into my lap. Limp, her eyes red and dry from her tears. She's quivering, and I tighten my arms, trying to quell the shakes.

"Ariella."

No response. Not even sure she's heard me.

I reposition her until she's cradled in my arms and stand, keeping her against my chest, head in my shoulder, and carry her from the room and through the house, not releasing her until we're both seated in the centre of our bed.

"Ariella, I'm so fucking sorry, but I refuse to accept this. I'll hire a dozen more doctors to continue testing, if I must. This isn't over."

Still no response, but I'm not expecting one. Her gaze has remained open and empty, desolate as she zones out staring at the bed.

After a long moment, her ragged breath blows over my arm, easing me. At least, she's trying. "It is," she whispers in a tone more broken than anyone I've ever heard use. "Because this all makes sense."

"How does this make sense?" I stroke her face, clearing the strands of hair away.

"Because everything good in my life ends, so it was only time we did too."

We're not over. The thought flitted in my head sometime between Dr. Rancott's call and when I took Ariella into my arms. Unions within the mafia are to ensure the bloodline continues, and as a Rossi, it's of the utmost importance. My entire purpose for agreeing to a marriage at all—Ariella, Aurora, Vanessa, or anyone else—is for an heir.

But Ariella became much more than that.

I won't let her go. A million tests can have the same outcome, and I refuse to release her. Ariella's mine for better or fucking worse. Everything else can be figured out later.

"I'm not letting you go," I tell her. "I don't care what one doctor claims."

“Yeah,” she replies, her tone filled with doubt. “And when multiple tell you the same thing?”

“Still won’t matter.” I grip her the back of her neck, forcing her to look in my direction. “Ariella, there are other ways.”

“Your family—”

“Fuck my family.” For the first time ever, I mean it too. Mother and Father will lose their fucking minds, but I don’t care. The *Famiglia* will see this as a betrayal…but I don’t care. The organization I’ve spent my entire life breathing for is secondary to the tiny woman in my arms.

Ariella pushes against my arm, trying to sit up, so I help her since it’s the most sign of life I’ve seen from her since arriving home. Her expression is still desolate, staring at the bed rather than me.

“You know what the funniest part in *all* this is?”

There’s nothing funny about it, but I wait for her explanation.

“Growing up, my plan was always to have the fairy-tale ending. Not sure why or where that dream even came from, but all I knew, is getting a good job, meeting someone to fall in love with, eventually marry, buy a house, and begin a family was it for me. Then Mom met Stefano, and within years, all my possibilities were ripped away. Interesting how someone else’s relationship can deem that, but it was their marriage that led to her eventual death. The accident that took *me* from me.

“And then my life ended. I was shoved into a medical centre, only ever visited by two people. The random day Nico dropped in, I sensed changes unfolding. He offered me an out, to be free with Della again, so obviously I took it. But then they got together, and at that point,” she shrugs to herself, “I already lost the future I dreamed of, so I remained with the Corsettis. Mom’s marriage brought us into mob life, and Della’s relationship kept us there. Besides,” she snorts lightly, “what was the point in leaving? I didn’t believe I could have the life I once dreamed of, and who’d want me anyway? Mute, unable to function normally. Pretty pathetic.”

My hands curl by my sides, ready to counter every single one of those points. If only she’d look in a damn mirror because I craved her the moment I met her at Corsetti’s engagement party.

Her eyes lift slowly to mine. “You want to know why I *truly* volunteered to marry you? Other than the fact that I’m downright pitiful and pushed myself onto you. I was seeking some sort of semblance of my dreams. I never deluded myself into believing you’d love me. Marriage to

you isn't what it'd be for me, but it's okay." She scoffs. "Makes me a masochist, I guess. Marrying you would also give me the children I wanted. If the past version of me ever looked into the future, she'd see this. At least from the outside, I could pretend to have achieved my dreams."

Gutted. It's a sickening feeling—*fact*—to be helpless. I can't *do* anything to help her through this. There's no one I can hurt who'll fix this. Just endless doctors to provide hope.

"Ariella—"

"But now, it's fucking over, Erico. It's *over*." Her gaze finds me again but there's no more sadness. Not for the moment. She's moved through that stage of grief. No, there's a brokenness instead. Acceptance mingled with misery mixed with anger. "You need an heir, and I can't provide one." I'm about to counter, but she continues, her voice firmer than before, "You know what the *worst fucking part* of *all* this is? I fucking fell in love with you. I *love you* and when I'm able to finally say it, it means nothing."

She loves me.

I've never wanted a woman's love. Never *felt* a woman's love. Even my own mother's love was distanced. A mother's love, sure, but once I reached ten-years-old, I spent more time with my father than her, allowing her to return to her pre-child life of shopping, alcohol, and parties without concerns. Despite wanting a sibling, I never got one because I'm certain they only had sex to create me, and once my mother was pregnant with a boy, they accomplished the goal of their marriage.

That's precisely what I expected mine to be like. I never expected to gain my wife's love.

But *Ariella's* love, I crave like fucking air. I've been grasping at it for days now, unaware that's what I was even reaching for. Perhaps I have since the beginning, since the moment she volunteered for this union, and I was able to see the silent woman from the party wasn't *her*. It wasn't her entire personality, despite the façade she dressed herself up in. There's more to her and I found myself wanting to uncover it. Longed to taste it for my own.

Longed for *her*.

A stray tear drips down her cheek.

I've fucked up again. After everything she disclosed, my response is lodged in my throat behind guilt. The guilt that it was my own doctor who brought this all to light, guilt I'll also never be what she wanted. She craved normal. To fall in love.

Guilt because this changes nothing.

When she shifts, and her hair blocks her face, I bring her closer, first pushing her hair away. I don't kiss her, not yet, just cup her face and stare into her eyes, searching through the layers of pain to the woman I've discovered to be my everything.

"Ariella, you won't be changing my mind. We'll get every single fertility test we can ran, and even if they all return with undesirable results, we *will* do whatever we need to. You will get your child, and if not from science, we'll fucking adopt."

"Your family—"

"Doesn't matter. *Sirena*, I'll entice an internal war with the *Famiglia* to keep you. You're not going anywhere. What we've learned today doesn't change how I feel about you."

Amidst the misery, a small flame ignites in her eyes. A spark. It's present and now it must continue to be fanned, to ensure it blazes and doesn't dim.

"How do you feel?" she whispers, resting her hand over my heart.

I lay mine overtop, ensuring she feels my next words. "I don't know what love is, Ariella. My parents sucked at conveying it. But if love exists, it's what I feel for you." My hand presses into hers harder, trying to imprint her touch onto my skin so I never have to be without it. "I'm obsessed with you and have been since the beginning. I fell in love with you before you spoke to me, but giving me your voice, *sirena*, that was a gift I'll never be able to repay."

The spark grows brighter.

But when I'm about to kiss her, it dissolves. Like a lighter being snapped shut.

She falls against my chest, her hands covering her face, hiding from me.

And cries. Sobs.

Apologies, *I love you*s, begging for hope, negative statements about herself, mentions of guilt—everything and anything.

She's rolling through every grief stage within minutes of one another. Back and forth. Years of hopes and dreams being confused with reality. I reply to nothing she mumbles, whether the truth or a lie. She has to feel every emotion bombarding her, so I hold her through them all, rubbing her back, petting her hair, gripping onto her so she knows.

That no matter what happened today, I fucking love her.

And I’ll burn the world down to keep her.
My family included.

Ariella

Darkness.

Misery.

Amongst the pain, there is a light continuing to break through. A support like none I've had in the past. A person that held me for all the hours passing. One? All night? Time goes differently when you're crying.

At some point, I'm sure I passed out because I recall him undressing me, and then there was a pillow beneath my head.

Through the ongoing tears, the wave after wave of breathtaking despair, I heard him. *Heard* all his reassurances. Swallowed them like a fucking pill, like medicine to heal my wounded soul. I love him more for them, but it doesn't change the fact of what we learned.

I might be unable to conceive.

Science, adoption, all the options he's listed are fine, but they're not the same as growing the child myself. Not the same as learning all my dreams are being ripped from me one at a time.

Processing, I am not.

Eventually, Erico presses his lips to my forehead, but the time is unknown. I can't check because my eyes refuse to open, sealed shut with dried tears and exhaustion. He lingers, inhaling, and I don't know why, but it brings a smile to my face.

His fingers remain on my hand until he’s gone entirely. He must shut the curtains because the light behind my lids dim even further. After he goes, sleep tries to drag me under. Exhaustion has me craving the bliss of nothingness, but it never comes. Only hovers while my racing thoughts are ongoing.

Maybe I eventually doze, or I don’t, but my phone’s ringer cuts through the silence.

My sister’s name flashes on the screen, providing me every reason to *not* answer it. But if I’m correct in my assumption, then she won’t stop until I shut the phone off. My fingers slide over the two buttons that’ll bring up the power option…but instead, I swipe, answering the call.

Maybe for once, I don’t want to wear my mask. Don’t have the strength to lift it to my face and bury the truth any longer. Erico’s seen and is acceptive of me so far, so why wouldn’t my sister?

“Why did your husband call mine, who texted me, to call you?” is her flurry of questions.

The device is heavy, my weakened muscles unable to hold it to my face. I stick it on speakerphone and drop the phone to the bed.

“Also, I’m in the car with Aurora, and you’re on speaker, but I could call later, if you’d like. Nico messaged minutes ago, and he sounded sketchy, so I didn’t want to wait.”

Another smidge of light. Aurora’s presence doesn’t matter. My sister’s energy, while overwhelming, is secondary to the feelings. The words that slip out during my next breath, whispered so minutely, but impactful on my soul, so uncaring that someone other than my sister can overhear.

Like saying them aloud, to someone outside my marriage, makes them more *real*.

“I can’t have kids.”

Silence.

I sense them glancing at one another, can practically see Della leaning forward.

“What are you talking about, Ariella?”

“They ran a test. My body can’t produce eggs. I won’t conceive.”

Are the words truly being said aloud, or only in my head? Admitting the impossible, but then again, my mood also tumbles backwards, to the time before Erico found me on the floor. Numbness creeps up, wrapping around

my throat. If I speak so matter-of-factly, maybe my own brain will soon accept them.

Della makes a soft noise. “Ariella…no. No. That’s always what you dreamed of.”

I know.

“Is Erico aware?” Then she scoffs, answering her own question, “I’m dumb. Of course he does, considering he’s the one who spoke with Nico. What did he say?”

Silence. This time for me. Everyone on this phone call knows the reality of this situation. It’s almost fitting in a cruel way that Aurora’s listening in. Ironic since it should have been her conceiving the *Famiglia* heir.

“He claims it doesn’t matter. That he cares for me. That he’ll get more doctors and more tests ran until we get a more desirable response. He says no matter the outcome, we’ll have a child one way or the other.”

“That’s a better response than I thought he’d give, to be honest. This is positive…even if it’s not exactly what you’re looking for. If he’s willing to work with you, then maybe I didn’t give him enough credit.”

“I love him,” I admit without another thought. “I don’t know how or why, but he broke down my barriers, and I do. I *can’t* lose him, Della. I’ve lost so much I care for. He can’t be yet another person.”

“He won’t be. I’ll have his balls if he does.” There’s shuffling in the background and then, “Hang on. I’m hunting down Nico. We’ll be there in a few hours.”

Here. No. On another man’s territory. Then my sister will see me in all my miserable glory.

“Don’t, it’s fine, Della. Besides, the moment of my vows, we ended up on separate sides.”

“I know,” she replies regretfully. “But I feel so lost right now. What can I do to help?”

Get me a better functioning system.

Another voice comes through the speakers. Softer, packed with empathy. “Ariella, it’s Aurora.” *Knew that.* “Look, you mentioned it being your egg production, which means for now, you can still *carry* a child.” She pauses. “I’m sorry, I suck at this. I’m just trying to say, there is a positive here. Be with Erico. Let him support you. If you need to talk, call us. You know we love you.”

What she's suggesting makes sense, but hope is difficult when one's mood already deems things are hope*less*.

"Ariella?" my sister calls when I haven't responded in a while.

I hang up and bury my head in my pillow.

Let the darkness consume me.

The bits of light seeping through—I need to grasp them. I know I do.

But for now, I hug my stomach and cry in the silence of the room. I sob until sleep swallows me whole.

Erico

All night, I held her with only one goal: being there for her. Holding her through the agony, but every minute of that night that passed, every sob, every hiccup, festered my own rage until remaining still became nearly impossible. I still did, *for her*, but the longer I tapered the killing streak, the more I comprehended my true feelings toward her.

And the more pain I wanted to inflict.

Alongside the sickening realization that there is nothing and no one in this world I can cut deep enough, punch hard enough, that'll change Ariella's medical results. But it would give me a place to release the pent-up emotions that embedded into my heart throughout the night.

By the time morning arrives, she finally passes out, so I detangle myself from her with a quick kiss to the forehead, my hand lingering on her skin, revelling how smooth her skin is. I hate how early I have to leave her, having to drive into the city, but ideally, she'll sleep all day.

After calling Nico and demanding he get Della to phone her sister, Caladin meets me at the warehouse without questioning why the sudden urgency to be here. He dismisses the soldier he posted on guard duty with a nod of his head. While they share a few words, I pass right by them both and stalk inside the dim warehouse, the scent of dried blood and fresh piss greeting me.

Caladin jogs to catch up. “Whoa, good morning. Hello. Anything? Do I not deserve a greeting after retrieving the fucker?”

No one’s screams will alter Ariella’s outcome, but the fucker Caladin’s speaking about deserves death for taking something from her. So for now, he’ll do.

The man in question is in chains, bolted to the floor. He’s glaring at me from behind the dirty, red bandana shoved into his mouth. He remains still, not fighting the chains, unlike so many of the other unfortunate souls who find themselves in here.

File on him states he’s a mercenary, wanted in numerous countries for various crimes. He knows what’s happening, what to expect, which is why there’s still not even a single flash of dread when I rip the bandana from his mouth.

“What’d I do to you? Who’d I kill?”

His cockiness will make his death even more thrilling.

“Two years ago, you were driving a white panel van. Your orders were to slam another car into oncoming traffic.”

His gaze lowers, eyes moving back and forth like he’s searching through memories. Then a slow grin spreads over his mouth. “Oh, yeah. That was a decent payday.”

“Yeah.” I tilt my head, feigning consideration. “I hope that payday was worth making an enemy of the *Famiglia*.”

His eyes dart over my form, to Caladin hovering behind me, and then the warehouse, and finally, his distress reveals itself. “Wait. *Famiglia.* What the fuck am I doing in the U.S.?”

“The accident you caused killed a woman. Changed the lives of two other women when they lost their mother. One of those women is my wife.”

With every word, realization hits him, and he finally starts fighting. For his life, a greater understanding of why he’s here. The chains rattle and he backs up as far as he’s able to. I don’t approach though, simply remain rigid where I am.

“Wait, you know how it is, man. It was two years ago! I was *paid*. Take out the fucker who hired me for the job. I’ll tell you his name, if you let me go.”

I smile, but not one that indicates pleasure with any of his words, and even release a light chuckle, informing him precisely how unamused I am by his begging because there’s nothing this asshole can offer me, I’m not

already aware of. “Gage Roche hired you under the command of Stefano De Falco.” His mouth drops open. “The Corsettis killed both of them. But you…you’re *mine*.”

“It was two years ago!” He returns to his earlier argument, his pointless fighting continues as he wrenches his entire body into the chains. “Look, she’s still alive, isn’t she?”

“You must enjoy pain,” Caladin mutters from behind me.

If he does, then he’s about to have a damn buffet. I walk by him, heading toward the farthest wall where a metal table is. Numerous torture options, tools and knives, wait to be chosen.

But as I stand there, inspecting every single death-delivering, pain-inflicting weapon, I see Ariella in my head again. Not her smiling, or swimming in her sexy bikinis, or even playing her piano. No, instead it’s the tears that consumed her all night. Her sobs, which shattered my own control, awakening a part of me that requires a blood debt. The slightest bit of feeling to be worthy of helping her through her own pain.

I *need* this man to feel an ounce of what she does. Losing her mother, her voice, her life all in one hit. The pain she’s surviving through now though…that’s something else. It’s her strength that reassures me she’ll make it through.

So I turn away from the table and instead, shed my coat. The fucker doesn’t deserve knives or bats, or any tool. It’ll be my fists that take him out. The absolute pleasure of using him like a punching bag, to release the monster within.

“Unchain him.”

The man’s expression brightens, but it’s pointless. This isn’t an escape. It’s an execution.

Caladin steps forward, looking at me like I’ve lost my mind. And maybe I have. “Erico—”

“Unchain him,” I repeat. “Trust me, he won’t escape.”

My captive’s happy expression falters in a blink, and he scans the warehouse again, licking at dried, chapped lips. He’s seeking an escape and locks onto the door far behind me, but he won’t even make it three steps toward his fatal attempt.

Caladin obeys me, digging out a key from his pocket, while still shooting me confused glances. The moment the man is completely freed, he takes off toward the door.

Big mistake.

I lunge.

A slow clap fills the now-silent warehouse, the skin-on-skin sound echoing through the building. It seems somehow louder and quieter than the screams, the squealing of blood, the breaking of bones that's otherwise been the music.

Straightening, I watch my cousin approach, appreciation and surprise filling his expression, while my breath catches up from the workout.

"Erico, what the fuck was that about?"

With his foot, he nudges the body on the ground, which is growing as cold as the cement floor. There's nothing distinguishable about him anymore. A face smashed in, body parts cut and strewn around us. The scent of blood and death fill my nose, but I breathe it all in.

And feel fucking fantastic.

Thinking he could escape and proving to him how he couldn't was exactly what I needed to feel *something*. He managed to fight back pretty decently and got a hit to my ribs, and one to my cheek, which is now sore. But his hits only alleviated my urge to make him pay. For her, for Della, for their mother, the fucker's dead. Everyone involved in their pain is gone.

"Um," my cousin's loud voice breaks my thoughts, "I ask again: what the fuck was that? I've never seen you so psychotic. I mean, when you asked for him to be released, I assumed you lost your fuckin' mind, which after witnessing this bloodshed, I think is exactly the case." He pauses, studying my blood-soaked shirt, which is cold and sticky against my chest. "Erico, you completely lost your shit in a way I've never seen. What's going on?"

"He killed their mother." First instinct says to hide the truth for as long as possible, to not let this get out to the rest of the *Famiglia*.

"Yeah, but that was…" He trails off, glancing at the lump of flesh between us. "It was something, Erico. Quite the show. Clearly, something's on your mind."

Caladin's not only family, but he's my most trusted, and really, I don't *want* to hide this from him.

“What I’m about to tell you needs to stay between you and me.”

His sharp gaze narrows, and he straightens, as though aware what he’ll be hearing isn’t light.

“Doc checked her blood. She’s unlikely to conceive.”

His mouth falls open. “Um. Wow. Okay. Not what I was expecting.”

With the single fact out, the rest of my emotions pour out. Right here, in a blood-stained warehouse, with a mangled corpse between us, I admit everything to my cousin, my chest growing lighter with every single syllable.

“I’ll get every fucking test available ran. Hire every doctor. Get second, third, fiftieth opinions before giving it up.” My breath becomes harsher, the next truth painful in ways knives and violence can’t match. “Caladin, she fucking *wants* kids. You know what she told me last night, in between tears and speaking in a tone so fucking calm, it was nearly deadly? Since childhood, all she’s wanted was the happy life. Grow up, meet a guy, get married, pop out some kids.”

“And she got you,” he jokes lightly, trying his usual thing of easing tension. Except it’s not a laughing matter because he’s correct.

“Yeah. She volunteered herself, searching for the happy ending she craves, knowing that with this life, children would be a guarantee.”

He sighs, his dark eyes filled with regret. “Fuck. I’m sorry, man.”

Finally, I lift my head, meeting his gaze so he realizes the meaning behind my words. “You know as well as I do, I didn’t expect to enjoy my wife. Caring for her wasn’t supposed to happen, but it’s what has. You didn’t see her face. This shattered her, and it fucking *kills* me, that no matter how many alternatives I offer, it won’t change the news she received.

“But there’s still hope, right?”

I called Dr. Rancott on the drive in, begging for every test he can muster, demanding he hire every specialist in the world. And asked for the gritty truth: the likelihood of his results being incorrect.

“Very little,” was his response. I hung up after that. It was the best I could do before turning the car around and hunting him instead.

“Yeah,” I tell my cousin, a partial lie. “Yeah, there’s some hope.”

“You know, if she really can’t—”

My hand slices the air, silencing him. “Nothing, Caladin. What I told you today stays between us. No one else can now.” Even if he’s correct,

there will be a time, others will have to be made aware. “I won’t lose her. I won’t let her go,” I admit, my tone losing some of the edge.

He nods slowly, rolling his lips together. “If any of them,” —He doesn’t define *them*, nor does he need to— “learned this, they’d view it as a betrayal. That you’re choosing your wife over the *Famiglia*. And the fact of the matter is, you could very well be. Honestly, I never would have thought there’d come a day you did put someone above the organization.” He pauses, approaching by a single step. “But you got it, I’ll keep my mouth shut. All I know is, it sucks this is happening, but there’s no one more able to shoulder the pain than her.” He slaps me on my arm as he passes, heading for the door. “I wish you luck with my entire fuckin’ heart, man, and if you need to talk, you know where to find me.” I trail him to the door, working up some way to thank him when he speaks again, this time, lighter and more like the Caladin I’m familiar with. “But the next time you need to release some anger, come find me and we’ll spar.”

I whistle. “Death wish. You’d spar after watching what I did?” I tip my head toward the warehouse, indicating the death there.

He laughs and shakes his head, all but shoving me toward my car. “Go home, clean up, and be there for her. I’ll get him taken care of.”

My feet press firmly into the dirt for a second. “Any word on who paid Anders?”

Caladin frowns. “No, and it’s weird. No note in the apartment. Couldn’t even find the cash. His phone was gone too. No trace.”

“Keep searching.”

She’s in the same spot I left her, lying on her side, facing the window. The blanket’s pulled up to her hip, but then I hear her voice, and stop in the doorway.

“—maybe because I’m not actually face-to-face with you, I can. If this even counts since you’re not going to listen to these messages, are you? Why am I’m bothering anymore? If anyone will find you, it’ll be your sister. I miss you, though. Something’s happened…something heartbreaking, and while everyone here is giving me hope, it’s not the same, you know?”

My hand slides form the doorknob, heart hammering faster, if only to keep it working and not to shatter with her despondent tone.

“They’re showing me the light but it’s so difficult to drag myself from the darkness. To *want* to. It’s only been a day since I received the news, but damn, this hurts. It feels like everything good in my life will be ripped from me soon and I have no control to stop it. Again. Erico made a lot of my negative thoughts go away, but they’re returning stronger.”

Negative thoughts?

“Getting out of bed seems impossible. Even thinking of my music or swimming isn’t doing it. The news might have put me into this mode, but I think my brain’s what’s keeping me here.”

Her brain?

“Anyway,” she sighs, “this is my verbal diary, I guess, and before your phone kicks me off, bye.”

She sighs again and I count to ten before entering, so she doesn’t realize I was lingering outside the door. When I finally enter, she hears me immediately and peeks over her shoulder. For a beat, her misery burns away into surprise as she sits up.

“W-what happened to you?”

I debated showering in a guest room, but the moment I arrived at the mansion, seeing her was my every focus, so the plan to hide my blood-caked clothing didn’t remain.

“Not my blood,” I reply and head for the bathroom. The shirt isn’t salvageable, so I toss it right in the trash, alongside my pants, and then enter the shower.

Beneath the hot spay, I wash all the blood from my skin. It tinges the water as it’s sucked down the drain. Standing there, I reflect on every interaction with Ariella, right from the beginning when I left her here alone and Sebastian reported her not getting out of bed for those days after.

Her mood’s ability to flick on and off.

The subtle self-hating comments.

Oh.

Ariella

Sometimes it's easy to forget who my husband actually is when he only allows me to see the non-criminal side of him. But watching him stride through the bedroom, stripping his blood-soaked clothing on his way to our bathroom made my insides clench with desire, my stomach flutter.

Am I really this fucked up already? Or is this some trauma response to the misery? My body's way of searching for something positive.

Erico's presence has made me sit up, which is further than I've gotten in hours on my own. After my call with Della, I dragged myself to use the bathroom, but that was the last time I moved. My stomach feels hollow, but I'm not hungry. My eyes sore, but I don't want to sleep.

I don't know what I want.

A few minutes later, Erico returns to find me chewing on my lip, a towel around his waist. Instead of his usual heated grins, his brow's dipped low, his eyes shadowed with concern. I vow when he returns from dressing, I'll fix my expression to seem more okay.

Based on the look he gives me when he comes back, dressed in a pair of low hanging shorts, I don't succeed.

Without pause, he strides to the edge of the bed and scoops me in his arms. Tossing my phone on my lap, he walks me from the bedroom.

I don’t know what he’s doing, but I’ll never tire of his hold. Especially now, since it might have an expiration date. He claims otherwise, but when push comes to shove, he’ll choose the organization over me, and I can’t even despise him for that.

Silly, pathetic fool in love I am.

“What are we doing?”

“You’re eating. Because the fact I have no idea the last time you did scares me.”

He descends the staircase, and with every step away from the bedroom, more of that lightness continues to peek through. I ruin it by asking the very question I’ve been wondering since he left this morning.

Resting my hand on his heart, I ask, “I’m sorry. Are you mad?”

He takes so long to reply that old worries creep up. *Of course, he is. You’re no good to him anymore. Useless. Always second best. You shouldn’t be his wife.*

Finally at the bottom of the stairs, he replies, “Yeah. Extremely mad.”

See? You’re no good for—

“But not at you.” His hold tightens, his gaze capturing mine. “Never you, Ariella, and don’t you fucking think it. I’m mad *for* you. Pissed you’ll have to experience this doubt, these feelings. Of everyone in the world, this isn’t fair.”

In the kitchen, he deposits me on the counter and turns for the fridge. He begins pulling out a bunch of food—eggs, meats, cheeses, vegetables—and I realize *he’s* going to cook. My mafia boss husband is working in the kitchen, of all places, and it seems laughable.

Only an hour after he killed someone. Presuming that’s what the blood came from.

“Omelet?” he offers, already retrieving a pan, which begs the question how much choice I have in this.

Unable to talk through the cotton in my throat, my hands come up in a *Yes* sign.

He gives me his back as he begins preparing the vegetables and cheese to be mixed in with the eggs. He works in silence, while I mentally practice phrasing a question about his bloodied clothing.

But he talks before I manage to. “Once, any betrayal toward the *Famiglia* could be the only thing to trigger my rage. Traitors have no place in this world and my role means protecting the *Famiglia,* and doing what’s

right by them.” The knife sounds so much louder when it clangs against the smooth countertop, and he focuses on me. “But the rage I’ve been living with since I found you on the carpet yesterday is like no level I’ve felt before. I *hate* you’re going through this, and not because I need a son. The future of the *Famiglia* isn’t even a consideration over your happiness.”

And then, like he hasn’t just shattered my heart in every right way, he picks up the knife and finishes slicing the onion. My eyes prick with tears, but it’s not from the onion’s juices emitting into the air.

“I hate that you have to go through it with me,” I mumble. “You have no idea how much I want to be normal. To not have to live through test after test. For once in my life, I just want simplicity.”

His grip tightens, his slices quickening, and I realize I should stop talking before he accidentally injures himself with the knife.

“So, you cook, huh?” I state, shifting the conversation as he heats up a pan.

“You are normal, Ariella. Don’t believe otherwise.”

Back on that then. He begins pouring the egg mixture into the pan, the sizzling sound filling the room, and I’m thankful I don’t need to respond.

He remains silent as he finishes cooking. He makes one large omelette, flipping it flawlessly until sliding it onto a plate. He brings over a fork and hands me the plate but doesn’t remove me from the counter. The scent of fresh food activates my hunger and my stomach knots in pain, the first bite feeling so much tastier than usual.

He watches me take that first bite, observing almost clinically until nodding. “Good.”

I take another two delicious bites, once again thankful to have him. Not only for cooking, but for making me eat. From experience, it’s unlikely I would have done it myself.

“When did you realize you had depression?”

He asks it so offhandedly as he wipes the counter, I almost question if I heard him clearly. He drops the cloth and spins, positioning his arms behind him so he grips the edge of the counter, where he leans between them. A position of ease, if it wasn’t for his tight hold, the veins in his arms popping.

How does he know? My mask should be up. He shouldn’t have noticed. When he came back, I sat up, I spoke, I acted human enough he shouldn’t have seen through it.

Oh, who am I kidding? Was the mask on entirely, or did it slip from my face and I allowed it to? For the first time ever, I *let* someone see the truth I've always hid.

"When I was sixteen," I murmur, swallowing my latest bite. It now tastes like dust and is unappetizing, so I rest the plate off to the side, my hands fisting together on my lap. "Mom knew, obviously. To this day, Della doesn't. Hid the diagnosis from her so she couldn't fuss over me because that's who she is. How did *you* figure it out?" And when? How much time has passed in which he allowed me to keep my blissful secret a lie?

"Whoever you left the message for, I overheard in the hallway."

No apology for listening in on a conversation that wasn't his business. No break in eye contact. I shouldn't expect anything less though.

I also shouldn't have left that message for Yasmine. I don't know why I did. It's only ever been texts, but in the silence of my room, my voice worked. The emotions overtaking everything else my brain struggles with and I *needed* to talk. Maybe to inform her, maybe to use the call as a diary. Either way, I reflect on what I said to her; what would have been indicative for him.

But then he answers my curiosity: "You spoke about a light and darkness that you struggled to bring yourself from, and negative thoughts that you were combating. Said getting out of bed seems impossible, which is why I carried you down myself. Swimming and music aren't appealing to you right now. You blamed your brain." He pushes off the counter and steps between my spread legs, his large hands sliding up my thighs until he's holding my hips. "And then I thought about how Nico told me you were a quiet woman who preferred to remain in her room, and how you didn't leave the room here for the first few days."

"Is that weird though? Considering I was shoved into a new place."

"Maybe if you didn't turn away all offers of food and ignore Sebastian." He quirks a smile. "Subtle, but the hints are there."

I cry. Without warning, sobs break down any self-control. My hands cover my face at the same time he pulls me into his chest, my legs hugging his hips. I lower my hands to press my face against his bare shoulder instead, using his warmth to melt the tears.

"Pathetic, huh," I mumble. "You talk about your admiration for my strength but all I do is cry. Cry and hide away in the darkness."

His hand cups the back of my hair, stroking the strands. “Pathetic you are not. Sometimes the greatest strength is allowing another to see your struggles.”

“My weaknesses, you mean.” I pull back to look him in the face.

“Depression isn’t a weakness, *sirena*. Nothing about you is weak. I’m simply the lucky one who gets to see the real you.”

Yes, the *real* me. If everything else about me wasn’t about to drive him away, then this surely will.

He cups my face and shatters the dark thoughts with a simple kiss. Simple, but powerful, and when he leans away, there’s a heat in his eyes I want to burn in.

Want to, but can’t. Even thinking about being intimate with him shuts my mind down. The mood is too great, too heavy right now to think about anything further. So I hug him instead, linking my ankles together behind his back and bury my head into his neck, and let him hold me, comfort me.

Heal me.

We stay like that for an unknown length of time before he releases me with a gentle smile and reaches for the plate I abandoned. “You will finish eating,” he commands, “and then we’re spending the day together.”

After all that, he thinks I’ll function enough?

“In bed, by the pool, wherever you want.” He cups my cheek. “But I’ll be there for every tear, Ariella.”

“Don’t you have to work?”

He only shrugs.

“So you’re on suicide watch?” It’s a joke, despite the unamusing nature of the subject, but then I realize he might think I’m serious, so I backtrack, “Wait. No, that’s not…I don’t—won’t.”

He smirks as I stumble over my words and taps the tip of my nose with his finger. “I’m on *sirena* watch. We’ll just call it that.” He backs away from my hold and returns to cleaning the counter as I pick up the fork again and shovel the now-cold egg into my mouth and reflect on what happened.

Erico’s gained every reason this week to kick me out, despite his assurances he wouldn’t. And still, it hasn’t happened.

Because he’s good for you. He’s right.

When I finish eating, he silently takes the plate and loads the dishwasher at the other end. He works in silence, until I break it, the earlier questions I had returning because he never answered them.

“Who’d you kill?” It’s almost laughable to ask such a thing so casually. “Don’t hide it from me. You were covered in blood. That was clearly a slaughter.”

He shuts the dishwasher before responding, staring at me with a near-troubled expression, his brows low, lips pinched. “Slaughter is the correct term. Let’s just say, I released a lot of my anger this morning. He was dying one way or the other, but became my project for self-care.”

Self-care is one term I wouldn’t think to use in this situation. “But who was it?”

With a sigh indicating he doesn’t want to admit it, he replies, “The driver of the white van that caused your accident.”

My expression falters, my mind blanks.

Or does it.

Crash!

Metal scraping against metal.

Tires squealing.

That singular moment. Calling for Mom when I saw the van approaching—I knew there was a man in the driver’s seat, obviously, but when I woke in a hospital bed, Della crying by my side, with a larger headache and bruises than I ever believed a body could function through, the driver became the least of my worries.

But somehow, a man who’d come into my life *two years post-accident* dealt with it.

“H-how—”

“The Corsettis were very willing to share the information they had. Gage Roche and Stefano De Falco might not be here any longer, but leads don’t die, and Caladin is *very* good at tracking. Within days, Caladin found him, and with Nico’s support, he was captured and handed over to us. He’s no longer breathing, Ariella. For *you*. For what you lost, for your mother, for your sister. For the ways your life changed because of a single hit. And believe me, I didn’t go gentle on him.”

Based on the state of his clothing, I’d say not.

Other women would run from the red flags. Me? I hop off the counter and right into his arms. His arm bands around my waist, gripping me as tightly as I hold his neck.

“Thank you.”

Thank you for taking away another person in the nightmare.

Thank you for being here with me.

Thank you for being more than I ever wanted.

Thank you for loving me.

Even if he hasn't said the words, he doesn't need to. I feel them. In his actions, in his words, in his kiss.

"Always, *sirena*."

And *that*, I do believe.

Erico

CALADIN

You guys still alive?

ME

Dumbass.

CALADIN

Hey, don’t judge the person who’s been sitting in on all your meetings. This isn’t my job, so you’re welcome.

ME

Don’t test me. Anyone else would get a punch for the snarky comment. You’re lucky you’re you.

CALADIN

Pfft. You wouldn’t survive without me by your side.

ME

Keep pissing me off and we’ll test that theory.

CALADIN

Ha! Big words coming from a man cooped up in his home for, what, three days now?

How is she?

urviving.

It has been three days, but it’s only felt like one. We talked a lot in that time. Sometimes in bed, most times on the lounge chairs by the pool. I preferred outside because the sun and sight of the property gave her something to look at rather than the darkness beneath the blankets.

She identified what the depression feels like for her—the shadows and darkness, as she referred to it, but indicated grey levels. The stages she feels her mood dropping in before she reaches complete blackness.

Either way, she’s agreed to inform me if something triggers her. In truth, I don’t know how to help her, but I want to. Want to know so I can try. When I told her that, she said my presence has been helping her.

I don’t think I’ve ever grinned so fucking wide.

CALADIN

Hello?

ME

She’s better today. She’s managing.

Over the days, I tried to avoid the topic of fertility unless she brought it up, despite it being such a prevalent subject, what triggered her darkness. She never did, so I didn’t mention anything. In the silence though, I thought about every route, have been sending emails back and forth with the doctor, who’s apologized over and over. As much as I wish I could find it in my black heart to hurt him for delivering the news, it’s not his fault. There is no fault to place anywhere. Just shitty facts we must live with.

CALADIN

So you’re back at work now?

ME

Reviewing the contract from your meeting the other day.

A contract for a new weapon’s dealer. One who’s promising an arsenal that’ll rival even the Russians. Maybe then, it’ll shut my father up.

CALADIN

I’m free then?

ME

Yes. Thank you.

Yesterday, Ariella expressed interest in getting up on her own. So she dressed in a bikini that had my blood heating and I joined her for a swim. It was for only twenty minutes, but it felt nice.

And she accepted my kiss—accepted *all* of my kisses over the days. I kissed her until I couldn't any longer, until I risked ripping the swimsuit from her and bending her over the pool's edge. An activity I vow to do soon, when she's ready. She apologized, but I waved her away. If her mood brings her to a place where eating is a struggle, I certainly don't want her feeling pressured to have sex.

Today, she awoke and told me she'd be using her piano for the morning. Wanted to get back to playing. Said she's only a light grey now. As much as I craved watching her perform, still eagerly awaiting to hear her sing, I took the chance to get work done.

As soon as I set my phone to the side, finished with my conversation with Caladin, my office doors burst open. The start of a smile graces my face because other than Carlotta, who doesn't come in here, and a couple guards stationed around for protection, Ariella's the only other person in the house. But the person who enters lowers my countenance faster than I ever believed it could drop.

"What the fuck do you want, Father?"

He strides through the office, in a suit looking two inches too short for him on the arms. His face is red, which means he's annoyed. His usual guise whenever he'd bitch at me when I was a kid, when I didn't listen to his instructions well enough.

"Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"Your useless wife is infertile?"

And now, doc's just earned his death. Clearly, he's forgotten my parents are no longer in charge. I push to my feet, suspecting this is a conversation better had standing.

"Don't call her useless, and she's not infertile. It was one test."

He cocks his head to the side, his smirk mocking me. "You're in denial."

"It changes nothing." Except in his eyes, it does, but I'm ready to fight him on this.

His expression cools a fraction, his hands tapping impatiently on the back of the chair he's standing by. "Sticking to your agreement with the

Corsettis, even after they denied you Aurora, is admirable. But the shtick is up. Send her home. Get the marriage annulled. Nico can't argue this because of the outcome. Perhaps he should have done his due diligence, considering her unknown heritage, but we should have too." He shrugs, like he's speaking about breeding farm animals. "Marrying in your position is to ensure the lineage, and he's aware of this. The *Famiglia* is relying on you for its future heir, and I'm sorry, but Ariella cannot do that for you."

What I hate most about my father in this precise moment, is he's correct. The old me—the pre-Ariella version—would have agreed without a second thought and sent her packing. A wife unable to conceive an heir is a betrayal to the *Famiglia*. Nico would have to take her back or risk a war, since he sent someone who'd be deemed as "ineffective."

But I'm not that person any longer and every word I told Ariella about our future was the damn truth.

"Why didn't you ever fall in love with Mother?"

He blinks, taken aback. "Excuse me. Is this really your largest concern right now?"

I stare.

"Fine." Shaking his head, he answers, "It's just not how it is. Your mother has some lovely qualities that have remained—thankfully—since the moment I married her, but love is a useless emotion in this world. Maintaining a normal relationship, on top of my job, is exhausting. Running the organization is a priority, exactly as I've taught you. Where is this coming from?"

I stare. It's in my silence he should discover his answer.

He huffs a single chuckle. "Son, I'm sorry, but it's over. This is why you don't fall in love with your wife. Now, you feel like you're stuck, but I will make this extremely clear: get rid of her. Divorce her. She will not give you the son you require. This is the time to connect with the Volkovs."

I've never punched my father before, not even in training. When sparring, he's always had his men fight me, which as a kid, I hated. I wanted Father to train *with* me, rather than observe like I'm the science experiment he was putting together.

Perhaps, that's exactly what I've been. If his father raised him one way, he's done the same with me. Without emotion. The *Famiglia* being his entire focus. Father lived and breathed the organization. Looking back, had

he and my mother ever actually spent an evening beneath one roof with me, longer than the odd forced dinner and holidays?

It was those very ideals he shoved into my head—that his father gave him, and probably so on—which I entered marriage with. It was what Ariella and I were supposed to have.

But she changed everything.

"We'll have a child," I grit, my hands curling by my side, a punch to his face seconds away from happening. "I'll get a son, even if we fucking adopt."

"Adopt?" His face flushes a deeper red, and then white with shock. "No. That is taking this entire thing too far." He slams his hand down on my desk, his old desk, in a way meant to be threatening. "*No!* Bringing in your no-name wife was insult enough on the Rossi lineage, but you will not further taint our bloodlines by adopting a nameless orphan."

I'm around my desk in an instance, my expression the only warning of what's coming. My hand fists in his shirt, right around the neck, and the buttons strain. Good. I hope they break.

He pants, his hands coming up to push me off, but lack of time in the field and his age plays against him and I'm stronger. Not that he ever paid me enough attention to realize that.

"Erico—"

"Leave. Before I ensure you don't leave here at all."

He gapes, his feet stumbling to keep up with the pace I've set. "I'm your father—"

"Are you?" I interrupt, a cruel smile taking over. "Blood doesn't make a family. It simply forces us to acknowledge one another in this fucked-up world. The second I was born, you didn't care for me or Mother. Your job was done—*I* was that task. But I'm changing things. Ariella isn't going anywhere, and the future of the *Famiglia* rests in *my* hands."

I thrust him through the open doorway, releasing him with a rough shove.

My father sneers and straightens his button-down shirt before pacing backwards, his head moving in a slow, almost saddened shake. "I tried to reason with you, Erico. Just remember that."

Ariella

The door to the music room opens and I smile. Erico mentioned only an hour ago, he'd be busy for most of the day, but I'm pleased he's stopping in earlier than planned. My fingers continue over the piano's keys without breaking, continuing to play until he speaks or the song ends, whichever comes first.

"Wow, you have some talent in you, after all."

Not Erico. My fingers stop pressing the keys, my final note more of a blend of sounds than anything decipherable. A female voice, one semi-familiar, and when I give her my attention, I see why.

Gia Rossi fills the doorway, her hands coming up in a slow clap. An action maybe polite if done by others but seems more ill-intended than anything, based on the slight hike in her nose, the flat line of her mouth.

I stand from the piano, not sure how to act. Gia didn't make a great initial impression on me, but she's still Erico's mother, which means I need to play nice for him and for the *Famiglia*.

She stops clapping as she halts in the centre of the room, standing right on my siren carpet. "Did you write that?" She sounds genuinely curious.

I nod, forcing my mouth into a slight upturned smile for sake of manners.

"Are there lyrics too?"

Another nod.

“None you’ll sing,” she concludes, any bit of kindness gone in that single assumption. Her hands lower, resting in front of her stomach, calling my attention to her pressed, dark pantsuit. “That’s unfortunate.”

I stare, first at her and then the door. If Erico’s mother is here, his father probably is too. Which means playing the polite daughter-in-law for the time. Perhaps the party was a one-off and from here on out, we’ll have a civil relationship.

Even if the churning in my stomach and the chill down my spine, say otherwise.

“My husband is meeting with Erico, so I thought I’d find you and apologize for the party. I’ll admit I was out of line.”

Surprise flutters through me, making my mouth dryer. Okay. This is a step in the correct direction. I force a smile, one tighter than I’d like it to be, but a start.

“My son is tenacious, and marrying you is a sign of that. I couldn’t see it at first, so I am sorry.”

There’s almost an insult woven in that, but at this point, I’m learning it’s simply Gia’s personality. She’s rough, bitchy, and nothing will change that. Brushing aside her snide comments would be best, so I accept the apology with a tip of my head.

“Right then, would you like to get a drink?” She gestures toward the doorway. “I can certainly use some coffee.”

Following her for a drink sounds like something I don’t want to do, but her offer is a band-aid. She’s *trying*. In the beginning, Erico mentioned me having to teach him how to be a better husband. Given Gia’s a boy mother, maybe she’s unfamiliar with the whole daughter thing.

I nod and step toward her. She turns and falls into step beside me. Her thin hand awkwardly comes up and she holds my shoulder, pausing my walk.

“You’re a lovely girl, Ariella. Very beautiful and I can see why my son is smitten with you. This hair—” She pinches a few strands between two fingers, staring at the colour in the afternoon sun streaming through the window. “Such a lovely shade. It’d take a lot of dye to get mine to this point. You and Erico would have made such beautiful children.”

Her statement is a knife to the heart; a reminder of what we won’t have. This isn’t her bitchiness. This is downright cruel.

I wrench my head away, ripping my hair from her hold, even though my scalp slightly burns.

"And that's why I'm sorry, Ariella, but this is for the *Famiglia*."

For the—

And then there's a syringe in her hand. She yanks my hair again, and my arms try to block her, but she maneuvers between them, and then there's a sharp stab in my neck. I still fight. I push away from her, throwing myself in the direction of the door.

Erico…I need Erico.

My vision blurs, the doorway no longer identifiable other than a giant black hole. The angle changes at the same time my knees burn. Am I on the floor?

What is…?

Sleep takes me.

The rumble beneath me slowly draws me from sleep. I blink open my heavy lids and stare at leather. Leather and light, and even warmth as the sun beats through the car windows and blankets my form, contradicting the chill consuming my nerves.

What the fuck? Gia *drugged* me.

Even thinking it has my head thumping lightly, the signs of a headache downright annoying. I groan, pressing my hand to my forehead, hoping the pressure eases the thump as I push into a sitting position, to orient myself. A mound of hair falls in my face, and I move it aside, scanning my surroundings.

A car. The outside is houses and a waterfront, so I don't think we're very far from the mansion.

Directly across from me are two people. Gia smirks before her gaze shifts out the window, as though not having any more time for me. By her side, Erico's father stares, a hardened look in his eyes.

The moment I focus on him, he speaks. "If someone had told me a regular woman from Montreal would destroy my family, I would have laughed in their face. But that's what is happening, Ariella, and what needs to stop."

His words barely register before the car takes a sharp turn. My balance rocks, my palms keeping me upright. Still dizzy from them drugging me, still trying to make sense of how I'd gotten from my music room to a vehicle.

"Luckily," his drawl continues, "my son agreed. We all know he requires an equal woman by his side, and you're not it."

Of course, I'm not. I've never been good enough for him.

I shake my head of the thoughts. Of the old worries returning once again.

Erico agreed. Why wouldn't he?

No! He wouldn't do this.

No. I don't believe their lies. It's all *lies*. Erico has said and proved otherwise. All they're trying to do is create confusion. The old me would have latched onto their words, and they would have formulated all sorts of self-doubt, but no more.

No more. I have to get out of here.

The car's driving too quickly, promising death even if I were able to leap from it. My mouth opens. *Where are we?* I try to ask, only for nothing to come out. *Come on, brain! If you're going to begin functioning, now's the time to.*

Gia faces me, her red lipstick forming a bold circle as she fake-pouts. "Still can't talk, hm? Such a shame. It's unfortunate that low-life street racer didn't succeed in wiping you out." She pauses, glancing at her husband. "It's amusing Erico thought we were never aware of what our own son was up to. Street racing. A nasty habit that can end so horribly, so quickly."

You could have killed your son too. They were so desperate to get rid of me…I'd be more shocked at the revelation if my head wasn't still so fuzzy.

"Perfect timing," Erico's father announces.

I follow the trajectory of his gaze, catching the road we're turning onto. Lined with trees, a massive cement ground, and the ocean beyond. A single, white plane is in the centre of it.

Shit.

Gia smiles at the same time the realization hits. They're sending me away. To Montreal? Or somewhere Erico won't find me?

Maybe he orchestrated this.

No! He didn't. He didn't and he wouldn't. He has no idea where I am—no idea how to find me.

The car jerks to a stop a little ways away from the plane. I scan the airfield, seeking escape. If I run, how far will I make it before Erico's parents track me down?

The plane's stairs lower and a man appears, followed by two huge guys dressed in cargo pants and leather coats. Guards, presumably, which makes the other man very important. He descends the steps and I glance at the Rossis, who haven't moved. No one does while he approaches the vehicle and I try to make out the man's features. The eel-like grin, the dark hair, pale skin looking like a corpse himself.

I recognize him. Ursin Volkov from the Russian Bratva. The man who caused all the drama with Erico at our party.

Fuck.

Gia chimes, "You're taking a trip, Ariella, and you won't be returning. Our son will be able to move on from you in peace."

Erico

Ariella isn't in the music room, so I head down the hallway, past the kitchen and toward the doors leading to the pool. I've been tucked away a lot longer than I meant to, so she probably got tired of playing and moved onto swimming.

As suspected, she's reclined on a lounge chair outside, facing away from the door. A large, wide-brimmed sunhat I've never seen her wear is perched on her head, her long red hair swept up beneath it, keeping her neck bare.

I stop walking. In all the times I've known her, Ariella's *never* worn a hat. Said she prefers her hair free, exactly like her free-spirit.

The closer I approach, the more the red flags rise up the pole.

Something's wrong. It's in the slope of her neck, the curve of her shoulders, her skin paler than normal. And the fact that she's lounging rather than swimming. Ariella's very rarely outside of the water.

My gun's in my hand in the next second, the barrel pressing against the hat of the woman I know to *not* be my wife. The click as it's prepared to shoot seems louder amidst the quiet outdoors, over the thrumming of my beating heart.

"Why are you in my home?" The gun jabs into the back of her head. "Up."

The woman lifts two pale, slender arms, her palms out in submission. As she stands, she grabs the hat, and lifts it from her head, tossing it onto the lounge chair she abandons. Her wavy hair tumbles down to her waist, black as midnight.

Even before she faces me, I *know* in my gut who'll be staring back at me. The malicious curve of her mouth, the hardened eyes, the pursing of her lips as she drops her hands to her side and cocks her hip slightly.

Vanessa Volkov.

I readjust the gun until the barrel is directed right at her forehead. "I'll ask you again: why are you in my home?"

She shrugs slowly and grins, an almost dramatic flair to her paced movements. "Figured I'd check my future mansion out. Quite like the pool."

"Ten seconds before the bullet finds your brain, Vanessa. Talk."

She rolls her eyes. "Words, Erico. All words. You wouldn't harm me and risk a war with the Bratva. We both know you'd lose."

"You think I fucking care?" I seethe, every word out of her bitchy mouth enticing my mood to go darker and darker. "Where is my wife, Vanessa?"

"You're looking at her. Well, your future wife, anyway."

My finger tightens, even though I know I won't kill her. Not yet. Not while she's clutching onto the facts I require. "How did you get in my home?"

"Right through the front door. Walked in with your parents after they disposed of your guys. Your wife's bodyguard is knocked out on the front step."

My arm falters, my hold weakening. Of fucking course, it was my parents. Father's visit wasn't only to convince me to end my marriage; it was a set up. When I didn't agree, they enacted whatever bullshit plan they created and left Vanessa here. For what precise purpose, I will learn.

I lower the gun only for my hand to snap out and clench the bitch's throat. For now, she's valuable because she knows where Ariella is. Vanessa gasps, which I cut off with a tight pinch of my thumb and forefinger, dragging her nearer until she's uncomfortably close to my chest but able to see the threat of death in my gaze if she plans on double-crossing me.

"You have three fucking seconds to tell me where my wife is or I will strangle you until you're a corpse at my feet." My fingers flex with my

threat.

“F-fine.” She gasps, her long, red nails scratching pointlessly at my hand. She can mark me up all she wants because they’re doing no harm to my skin. “M-my father.”

I release her with a rough jerk, and she gasps life back into her. Bent over, breathing through her mouth, her hands cupping her throat. She finally glances up, glaring, but with her obviously still alive, I clench her arm and propel her into the direction of the garage.

“We’re going on a drive and you *will* take me to her. You mislead me, you’re dead.”

She stumbles, and without fight, answers, “Nearby airport in Southampton. My father has a plane there. Your parents paid off the owner so no one alerted your men of our arrival.”

“Why?”

“To remove her from your life.”

Her unspoken words are what really hits. *They’re going to kill her.* I drag Vanessa straight to the garage, punching my thumb into the reader. The whirl of the door opening has never felt so slow, and impatience gnaws at me, energy bouncing on the tips of my toes until the door’s opened enough I’m able to shove us both inside and in the direction of the nearest car.

“Get in. Shut up.”

She does without a fight, her glare her only weapon as she rubs her arm. There’s no battle in her, and I wonder exactly how much training Ursin Volkov spent on his daughter. None obviously, deciding to use only her body to get ahead.

The moment I’m off the property, pressing the gas to take me to unimaginable speeds, I dial Caladin, his “Hey!” connecting over the Bluetooth and emitting through my car.

“Southampton airfield. Now. Bring men. Whoever’s with you.”

There’s noise in the background and a door being slammed shut. “Um, okay. What’s going on?”

“My parents kidnapped Ariella and left Vanessa in her place. They’re taking her to the plane. Volkov is here.”

“Shit!” More shuffling, voices, and another door. “Okay, fuck, coming. Leaving one of the clubs now. I have three with me. We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

“Make it faster.” *Click.*

“You really should reconsider,” Vanessa mutters the moment I hang up. “When your parents learned of your wife’s deficiencies, they were only too happy to call up my father and renegotiate.”

If I didn’t possibly need her, now that I know where to go, provided she isn’t lying, I’d get rid of her. But with Ariella’s life in Ursin’s firm grip, I’m not taking any chances. Leaving Vanessa with me was the single stupidest thing he could have done. Assuming they’d expect to be gone with her by the time I found Vanessa, and clearly, they’re delusional if they believed that’d change anything.

“You’re one more word away from losing your tongue, Volkov.”

“Whatever. You’re making a mistake.”

“My wife isn’t a mistake.”

I press the gas harder, knowing if cops spot me speeding, they’ll look the other way. Either the car itself or the licence plate will remind them, I own this city. I’m still ten minutes away though and it’s nine minutes and fifty-nine seconds too long for my liking.

Finally, fucking *finally*, I make it to the edge of the airfield, spotting the single plane parked in the centre, my parents’ car a couple metres away.

“Fuck.” If only I had more weapons…If I play this right, my single gun will do.

I stop the car feet away from my parents and am out, by the passenger side, instantly. Vanessa throws herself from the car, screeching as she tries to take off in the direction of the plane, but she doesn’t make it three steps before she’s in my grip. One arm clenched around her neck, I yank until her back’s to my front, my gun jammed into her forehead.

A few feet away, my parents stand, my mother’s eyes darting between me and Vanessa while my father simply frowns. A fucking *frown* is all his heartless ass manages as I’ve ruined his plans. A couple feet from them, Ursin fucking Volkov, flanked by two guards, their own guns angled toward me.

In a hold identical to the one I have his daughter in, Ariella stares, her eyes wide but flashing with relief. The gun positioned at her head means I

need to play this really fucking smart. I'm one against a small army, but they have me pinned by my weakness. By *her*.

I keep my eyes on her as I approach, reassuring her while I speak to Ursin directly and ignore my traitorous parents. "Simple trade, Volkov. My wife for your daughter."

Instead of Ursin, it's Father who speaks. He approaches, one foot in front of the other, his hands lifting to show he has no weapon. He's staring at me like I'm unhinged, which maybe I am. Maybe having my heart ripped from my chest and a gun shoved against her forehead has me seconds away from sparking a war. Vanessa or Ursin, one of them *will* die, but I have my preference.

"Erico, consider what the Volkovs can do for us. An heir, for one."

I ignore him, not bothering to grant him an ounce of my attention. Not looking away from my wife, whose eyes dart around the area, seeking escape.

I'm coming, sirena. I've got you.

"Keep my daughter," Ursin says, shrugging. "I have who I want. She's who'll bring you to your knees. You can't tell me if I rid the world of this common whore, you'd turn away my daughter then." He jabs the gun into Ariella's head harder, making her whimper, and red tinges the edges of my view.

"The second you move an inch, Volkov, your daughter's dead. Think this through."

He scoffs, the sound of a man with entirely too much confidence. He jerks his head, indicating the guys at his side who remain steady and focused. "Three against one, Rossi. *You* should think this through."

The odds might not be in my favour, but it doesn't stop me from planning. Caladin showing up now would be really fucking convenient because with my parents hovering nearby *and* the cause of this shitshow, they're no help.

Ursin steps toward the plane's stairs, dragging Ariella with him, so I move too, shoving Vanessa forward. She hisses, and the two men approach.

"Let us leave, Rossi, and we'll make the *Famiglia* more powerful than you could ever dream of. Let me take your pretty, little wife and you can keep my daughter." The eel of a man drags his nose up the column of Ariella's neck. "By tonight, she'll no longer be your concern. By tonight, she'll be a body thrown in an incinerator. One of many that get dumped in

the Russian northern mountains.” His eyes flick to me, his smile malicious. “Think her blood will be as bold as this hair of hers?”

Ariella’s jaw clenches and she tries to turn her head farther away from him. She jerks in his hold, but he has her too tight. I want to tell her not to fight, to keep still, so he doesn’t hurt her, but I refuse to suggest my little warrior stops fighting her battles.

Her eyes flash to me, narrowing, and somewhere between that look and her next blink, *la mia sirena* steals back her control.

Causing chaos to break out.

Ariella

Erico doesn't have a chance against three guns. His parents are unlikely to help—assholes that they are. Which leaves me and him against the rest. Meaning, only him, because I'm useless in Ursin's hold.

Useless but not helpless.

Warning Mom that the van was going to hit us, and her doing nothing about it, was a moment where I *tried*. Tried to be the hero, only to be ignored.

When Mom was dating Stefano, I made my concerns known. Something felt off about him and his entire family situation, the secrecy surrounding his home, but she ignored me.

Della insisted on following our stepfather's commands, all to keep me well and safe, and every time I told her not to, that we'd survive together, it fell on deaf ears.

Every single time I've tried to speak, there was only silence.

I want to make noise.

I don't want to be silent and useless.

Erico married *me*. Learned to love *me*. Claims *I'm* the *Famiglia* queen he needs by his side.

Time to prove it to him.

Time to prove to *everyone* that I might not be able to talk, but I'm fucking loud.

There is a sound in silence and it sounds precisely like this moment.

The moment where Ursin and Erico go back and forth with their demands and threats. When Ursin jams the gun's barrel into me harder, ensuring a headache tomorrow, all while his men approach Erico. Ursin has the advantage, and Vanessa and I are literally in the same exact position, being used as leverage.

No more.

My squirming was a test to determine how much freedom I have. Arms—none. Legs—plenty. And despite the grip on my neck, I can still use my head.

In a blast of movement I only warn Erico about with the narrowing of my eyes, I lift my foot and kick it as high as I can, aiming for Ursin's dick. At the same time, I lean forward and slam backwards, ramming the back of my head into his face.

The *crunch* tells me I've succeeded.

His hold loosens enough that I rip from it and drop to a crouch, everything a flurry of darkness and movement.

A gun shot sounds over the airfield.

Silence.

Sickening silence and the worst sensation begins creeping up until it's Ursin behind me who drops, a hole straight through his skull. Vanessa's agonizing screech bellows when Erico releases her to fight.

Ursin's guards surge forward, ready to avenge their leader, but Erico shifts the trajectory of his gun toward the first, and then the other, and they both stumble dead.

Silence again. Finished so quickly once *I* fought by my husband's side.

Then interrupted by tires squealing as another car comes zooming forward, parking beside Erico's.

I tense, crouched by the plane's staircase, watching the scene as Caladin's loud, booming laugh comes from the new car. "Goddamn it, we're too late."

Erico pays his cousin no attention, reaching immediately for Vanessa, who's since crouched by a vehicle to hide. He yanks her to her feet and growls. "You will get in your fucking plane and return to Russia. I *ever* see you in *Famiglia* territory again, I won't hesitate to shoot. Go home and tell

the Bratva that if they want a war, I'm ready. I'll take them down one at a fucking time, but they will *never* go near what's mine."

She bobs her head in a jerky nod. He releases her with a shove, in the direction of the plane, and she all but runs toward the stairs. She passes me without a second look as I rush the opposite way and head for Erico, right as Caladin comes up to my other side. The men he brought with him linger by the car, seeing no apparent threat.

Vanessa trips going up the metal steps and pauses at the top, her gaze finding her father's corpse, and for a moment, I pity her. It's difficult to lose a parent, even if she deserves no empathy from me.

Her expression hardens and she becomes the woman I met at the party again. Her gaze lifts to Erico, her words a shout from the distance. "The Bratva *will* retaliate, Rossi. You've just begun a war you won't win."

She turns and disappears in the plane, and another man appears, lifting the stairs. The Volkov pilot presumably, who hid during the fight.

The moment the plane's doors shut, I crave Erico's arms. Even when his parents claimed *he* was the one sending me away, he saved me. Erico hugs me briefly but quickly releases me, only his fingers dragging over the back of my hand in acknowledgment before he approaches his parents waiting nearby.

Caladin whispers, "You okay?" and I nod, throwing him a smile of gratitude.

"Erico—" Erico's father immediately starts only to be cut off by him.

"Leave."

"Excuse me?"

Erico points off into the distance. "I will call a pilot. You will go home and get whatever you need. By midnight, you both will leave this country."

His mother steps forward, crying, "Erico, we were only—"

"Silence!" Death's sounded kinder than Erico's tone. "There is nothing you will say to save you from my wrath. My *own parents* tried to get rid of my wife!"

His father explodes, almost shoving Gia aside. "Erico, you will drag the *Famiglia* down with your obsession with that girl. We were trying to do what's best for you. The Bratva is—was best for us. Power, strength, bloodlines. They had it all and you threw it away for *her.*"

I barely see his arm lift, but Erico slams his fist right into his father's face, knocking him to the side and into his mother. Caladin snickers, but I

don’t know what to think anymore, what to do.

“One more word out of your mouth, and I won’t hold back.”

Rubbing at his jaw, his father spits. “You’re making a huge mistake. The heads of the family will turn on you and you will have an internal war. Do you really want that after fucking with the Bratva?”

“Then maybe it’s time for the *Famiglia* to enter a new chapter. Maybe it’s time for the old capos to be cleaned out.”

Gia steps in front of her husband, once again, crying in a whining tone, “Erico, you’re our son. We’re your parents and you can’t—”

“Parents?” He barks a single laugh, no humour whatsoever. “No, you’re not. Was I ever your son? *Really* your child. I was a product of sex, created as an heir, trained to be Boss. You both showed me no love. I was your *task* and nothing more.”

“You’re an embarrassment,” his father spits, and right when I think Erico’s about to attack again, he simply points to their vehicle.

“You’re done. Leave. You step foot in the States again, even our shared blood will not save you. Retire far away from here and I never want to see either of your faces again.”

He turns away from them, giving them his back, heading straight for me. I glance over his shoulder, watching as his parents climb back into the car that brought me here, but the last thing I catch is his mother’s saddened expression before Erico consumes me.

His hands grab my cheeks, his mouth descending on mine with more passion than ever. He walks me backwards two feet, pressing me into the hood of his car. His tongue finds mine, consuming, devouring.

I let him.

Somewhere behind us, Caladin mutters, “Way to make a guy feel single. I’ll help clean up.”

“Fuck,” Erico drops his forehead to mine and all I breathe is *him*, “a million fears went through my head when I found Vanessa in the backyard instead of you. I died a few deaths. Never again.”

“Thank you,” I say simply, cupping his cheek. “Thank you for coming for me.”

“Always,” he replies, his tone guttural. With a single swoop of his arm, he’s lifting me by my ass and lowering me on the hood of his car, stepping between my legs, getting as close as possible. “I’m sorry the people who birthed me are monsters. I’m so fucking sorry for what they’ve done today.

If there's one positive, though, I hope you see now, when I claim I'm never letting you go, I mean it." Somehow, he manages to bring me closer to him, no space between our bodies now. His lips stroke gently over mine as he repeats, "I'm never letting you go, *sirena*."

A beautiful threat.

"Good. I'm so glad it was you I shackled myself to."

It's meant as a joke, but he's completely serious when he replies, "Me too, Ariella. Me fucking too." He kisses me again and this time, my core clenches, my body bending backwards, pushing my breasts into his chest. He's sparking a craving that even the death and violence of the day hasn't quelled. "I never meant to fall in love with my wife, *sirena*, but you taught me how. I love you, Ariella."

My heart soars, his declaration wiping away every ounce of darkness inside me. Every previous instance since the second he placed his ring on my finger. "That's the first time you've said those words to me."

With a downturned expression, he shakes his head. "Remember a while ago, I told you I needed to be taught how to be a husband? This is a prime example because I've loved you for a while now. I'm just a moron who's never told you."

"But you're my moron, so it's okay," I tease, pressing my hand over his heart, feeling the gentle thumping—*my* thumping. The heart that now beats for me. "Besides, I've felt your love and that's all that matters. Actions speak louder than words, haven't you heard?"

"Not until I met you. From the very first time I met you, hiding in the Corsetti wing, you've proved how loud silence can be." His eyes search mine, the same way he had that night. "*Sirena*, from then on, I was so taken with your silence, not understanding why at the time. Your eyes. This striking damn hair. It was a struggle to give Aurora an ounce of my attention through dinner when you were all I wanted to stare at. When I returned to New York, you continued to plague my mind, and I hated myself for it. You were the sister of Nico's wife, related to my own would-be wife through marriage, and I had no right to think of you in any manner other than civil politeness. But *fuck*, I couldn't stop myself." His lips trail the corner of my mouth, his smile imprinting on mine. "Couldn't help being obsessed with you. When Nico told me you volunteered for the union, I was thrilled because the redheaded *sirena* invading my mind for weeks would be all mine."

After his speech, after my heart's been ripped to shreds and taped back together, I tell him two words only: "All yours."

He kisses me again and I lean against the hood, fond memories of this very car in the middle of a rainstorm. Logically, I know this isn't the place, but fuck, I want it to be.

"Hey, lovebirds!" Clearly, Caladin thinks otherwise. "Maybe *don't* fuck ten feet away from dead bodies. Just a crazy idea."

Erico lifts his head to peek over his shoulder, toward his cousin. "Maybe *don't* cut into other people's business. Just a crazy idea." To me, he whispers, "He's right. We should go home. Clean you up. Because then I plan on dirtying you up."

Erico

I carry her straight into the bathroom when we get home, depositing her first on the counter, and then switching on the shower so the water heats up. She allows me to strip her clothing, and I brush along her bottom lip, ending her smirk, before removing her pants.

“You laugh, but I’m gaining immense pleasure from this.”

“From undressing me?”

“From taking care of you.”

Once she’s naked, I study her body, paying special attention to her neck in the bright bathroom lighting. She claims to be fine, but I must see it for myself, to ease the protective instincts threatening more death, if she isn’t. There’s no bruises, no swelling, besides a tiny dot from where she was drugged, so she seems fine enough until I invite the doctor here tomorrow.

Besides, he’ll be explaining how the fuck my parents learned of her fertility results.

For now, I walk her straight into the glass-walled shower. Water crashes down on her, making her hair a deep red, and she laughs. “I also think you enjoy carrying me.”

“All part of taking care of you. But for now—” I lower her to her feet, and once she’s steady, grab soap and a loofah and begin washing, “turn around.”

She does and I slowly wash her back, dropping to my knees in front of her as I wipe over the globes of her ass, her legs, her feet. She groans, her head falling back. Sex and freedom in her every motion, and it's a beautiful sight.

"Turn."

She obeys, placing that pretty pussy right in line with my face. I'll return to that soon, but first, I wash her front, over her stomach, chest, and breasts.

"Never thought I'd enjoy the sight of a man on his knees for me." Her wicked as sin grin promises so much more.

"Yeah?"

She strokes her fingers down the side of my face, tenderly, and praises, "Mhm. You look really good down there. I could get used to it."

Abandoning the loofah, I trail my fingers up the back of her legs and lift my face back to her pussy, so when I speak, my breath blows over her cunt. "Then I say, get used to it, and tell me how I can serve my wife from my knees."

She stills in hesitation, but after a single breath, the air in the shower changes. Electrified with her power. With a control I don't think she even realizes she has.

But fuck, this woman has *every* ounce of domination over me.

Her fingers drag down my cheek toward my jaw and she grasps a firm hold, tipping my head up to look at her, and my cock immediately jumps to attention. She's everything like this and I will be whatever she needs. Her thumb drags over my bottom lip and *fuck me*. She bends, pressing a single kiss to my lips. It's our most chaste kiss, and yet, I'm on the edge of panting for more.

"You missed a spot when you were washing me."

"Oh yeah?" I retrieve the loofah. "Where's that, wife?"

"My pussy."

She lifts her left leg and drapes it over my shoulder, placing her pretty cunt inches from my mouth. She never said how to clean her, but I drop the loofah in exchange for massaging her inner thighs until she rewards me with a moan.

"Good boy," she murmurs her praise, testing the statement with a whisper. "That feels really nice, but I'm still aching. Clean me with your mouth, Erico. Lick my pussy until I come on your face."

Gladly. Her commands, spoken with sex, will be addictive.

With both my thumbs, I part her pussy lips, baring that little ball of nerves that's about to make her lose her mind. I blow on her clit first, then flick my tongue against it, then blow again until she groans. Fingers weave in my hair and then she presses weight onto my head, shoving me right into her pussy.

"I said *lick*. Don't tease."

"Your wish is my command, *sirena*."

Keeping her parted with my thumbs, I lick, flicking my tongue back and forth over her core, and then covering her with my mouth, fucking my tongue inside her heat. Her hold on my hair becomes painful and she controls my movements, pushing her hips against my face. Riding herself to her orgasm.

She quickly comes, drenching my face in ways the shower is failing to. Her cry is one that'll reverberate in this room until the next one she gives me. And for our entire lives.

I was so damned close to losing her today. Not again.

Panting, she yanks on my hair until I detach from her. My lips are soaked and I meet her eyes. Her heated smile as she cups my cheeks makes my erection throb.

"So good at that."

"How else can I serve you, wife?"

"Take me to our bed and fuck me."

She doesn't need to ask again. I stand and she drops her leg from my shoulder, reaching behind to switch off the shower. I lift her in my arms and walk us both out the bathroom and toward the bed. Water darkens the thick carpet and I couldn't care less.

I drop her onto the bed, stepping between her legs, but she moves instantly, rolling to her knees and off the bed. She points to where she was just lying with her teeth scraping over her bottom lip.

"I wasn't done with you. On your back."

I obey her but not before flicking her nipple with my thumb as I pass, watching as the tight bud gets harder, her lips pressing together to hide how much she enjoys it. It's fun to witness her control slip bit by bit.

Once I'm on my back, she climbs over me and rubs her wet pussy against my cock. Her hands link with mine, positioning them by my head and pinning me down.

“You look so sexy like this, Ariella.”

“And you look so perfect, submitting to me like this.”

“Only to you.”

The next rock of her hips has my cock inside her tight heat. She squeezes my cock head and then the shaft as she lowers herself inch by inch, her breaths coming deeper. She moves up and down, wetting me before taking me entirely inside her.

“God, you feel so good buried inside me.” She groans, her head tipping back, her control slipping again.

I grip her hip with one hand and urge her to lean back with my other as she moves. It puts her core at a different angle, my cock brushing the most sensitive part of her.

“And you feel fucking fantastic, wife.”

Through her breathy moans, she smiles, meeting my eyes as her head rolls to her chest. Her hand balances on my abs. “I ever tell you, I love being referred to as that? When you say it, it feels *right.*”

“Because we are right, Ariella. Two sides of a seashell that have found one another.”

“Perfect for one another in every way,” she agrees, sinking down on me at the same time I thrust. “I love you, Erico, but now, fuck me. I command you to.”

“Gladly.”

As much as I enjoy her on top, I flip us over, sinking even deeper. My arms hook beneath her legs and I spread them, keeping her as helpless as she makes me feel as I hammer inside her cunt.

“H-hey…” she protests through pants, “I was…on top.”

“Believe me, you’re still in control, *sirena*.” I lower my head, taking her mouth as I kiss her into her next orgasm, swallowing it with every thrust of my cock. And I swear, her hand reaches inside my chest and fists my heart.

Steals it for herself.

Her pussy tightens around me, and fuck, I want to follow her down, but instead, I look to her, seeking instruction as she pants, wiping hair from her face. Her playful, knowing grin tells me she sees what I’m looking for, and her legs lift, hooking around my waist.

“Be my good husband and fill me with your cum. Ensure every inch of my body knows you’re its master.”

I pinch her chin, staring into her eyes. “No, baby. From the very first second you batted your fucking eyes at me, you’ve been my master. You control me in ways no one else can or ever will. Therefore, I will do nothing but continue obeying you.”

With her permission, my thrusts quicken. I grasp her hands, looping my fingers into hers as I hold them to the side, simply *holding* her hands as I ride her. As her back arches and sweat drips from her neck. I chase the drop with my tongue. Heat builds, the pressure becomes pleasurable, my orgasm approaching.

“I’m going to come,” I warn her.

“Do it, Erico. Now.”

My next thrust is my last as a blinding pleasure consumes me.

Consumes *us*.

The very way *la mia sirena* did to me all those months ago.

Ariella

Erico flits around the bedroom, dressing, while I observe from bed, leaning against the pillows. Both my legs are drawn up, arms draped over my knees, sheet covering only to my waist.

He's preparing to drop by a few clubs to…do whatever his job consists of. So much I don't know of his life. So much I *need* to know if I'm going to do this right.

Especially since you can't provide an heir.

My inner critic, for once, isn't malicious, but truthful. The *Famiglia* needs to see me as still valuable to the organization, even if my main task won't happen—possibly happen.

"I want to come with you."

Erico pauses, his fingers looping one button through his suit jacket's top hole. "Excuse me?"

"I want to come," I repeat, angling to my knees to shuffle toward the end of the bed. "The heads might have met me at the party, but I think it's only fair your staff and soldiers do too. If you're visiting your clubs and such, let me come. Please."

He approaches the bed, his expression flat and deadly, reminding me so much of what he looked like facing Ursin on the airfield. A *no* is undoubtedly about to follow, but then he grasps my right ankle and pulls me

toward the edge of the bed, stepping between my thighs. He cups my face and hauls me to his lips, pressing a kiss that ignites my entire being.

“Fuck, how did you even come into my life?”

“I forced myself upon you, if you’ve forgotten.”

He shakes his head, skating a hand down my bare back, cupping my ass, his fingers dangerously close to my sated core. “No, you never forced. You just knew what I needed before I did. Get dressed.” He releases me with a tap to my ass, stepping out of my way. “Yes, you’re fucking coming with me. I’d be honoured to have you there.”

With a gleeful whoop, I head for the closet, rifling out a dress that’ll be appropriate for today. It’s a light teal, a similar colour to the dress Erico met me in, with cap sleeves and a modest neckline.

When I return to the bedroom, he’s leaning against the bedpost, staring at his phone, but looks up at my entry, his eyes becoming a molten brown. “Damn, you’re gorgeous.” He follows me into the bathroom, leaning on that doorway instead, as I finish getting ready. “You know,” he starts conversationally, “Mother never did this. I guess Father never wanted her to, or she didn’t ask. Not sure. But the soldiers only knew *of* her, unless they were tasked with guarding her. You might be the first *Famiglia* queen to want to meet all the men.”

I freeze, brush halfway down my hair. “So, how many people are we going to piss off when I go?”

He comes up behind me, taking the brush from my hand and finishing my hair for me. “Who, the heads Caladin and I are still debating replacing? Who cares. If they say anything, it gives me the ammo to get rid of them. Like I told my parents, it’s time for a new era. You’re it. I bet you my soldiers will gain mass respect for you after today. There’s a major difference between protecting someone because they want to and because they have to.”

Well, that makes this seem better. I meet his eyes in the mirror, pressing my lips together before addressing a major subject matter hovering in the background in the two days since the near-kidnapping. I reported to him what they told me, that they were behind the near car accident too. He didn’t seem overly surprised and called off the investigation he had going.

“Have you heard from them?”

He steps back since I’m done and leads me from our room. “Not directly. They’re in the Bahamas. All our planes are outfitted with trackers;

plus, I had their pilot email me whenever they landed. I've had men travel there to keep an eye on them; temporarily, until I'm satisfied that they're settled and won't do shit."

I touch his arm, feeling a bit guilty for what happened. "I'm sorry you lost your parents because of me."

He throws a sad look my way. "I never truly had parents."

Hours later, we return and I might have experienced the most stressful, anxiety-inducing, *best* time ever. Even if my fingers ache from all the rapid typing on my phone to respond to any questions.

Erico took me to two underground casinos, eight bars, and four nightclubs. I met all the staff in each one—waitresses, bartenders, dancers, whoever—and met many of Erico's soldiers stationed at each one.

Even got to see Sebastian again. Turns out, he visited his kid nephew over the weekend and had an extra-long conversation with his newly-practiced ASL skills.

My favourite bar was the last one we dropped into, when Erico had a conversation with the bartenders, and one of the waitresses pulled me aside.

"Hope I'm not overstepping, Mrs. Rossi, but thank you for making this trip. You know, in all the years Erico's father owned this place, we never once met Gia one-on-one, unless she came in for a drink."

That made me smile. In fact, a lot of the day made me smile to the point, my mouth now hurts.

Erico shoves me right up against the door once we're inside, and grasps the dress, yanking it over my head. He yanks down my panties next, and the mansion's temperature makes little bumps rise against my skin.

"Wh-what are—"

Then he drops to the floor, spreads my legs, and spears me with his tongue. After a long, languid lick, he pulls back to respond.

"You, my fucking wife, have had me hard all day watching every one of my men turn to absolute puddles with your introduction. How different would my life be if you weren't the one who walked down that aisle to me?"

“Sweet, but that doesn’t answer what you’re doing.” My hand sweeps his hair back, fingers slowly dragging through the dark strands.

“What’s it look like?” Fire ignites in his depths. “I’m worshipping at the altar of my queen.”

He buries his head between my legs and certainly worships me until I’m screaming his name over and over.

The next day by the pool, I send off my final message to Yasmine.

There’s a lack of control in clinging to the past, and with Rozelyn and Nico managing her rescue—possible rescue—determining if there even needs to be one, there’s no point in me continuing to call and text. What was a form of self-care now feels silly, since I don’t even know if she has the same phone.

If she did, why wouldn’t she call her sister, Rozelyn, and let her know she’s all right?

Which means…she might not be all right.

“Yasmine, I’m worried about you. I’d do anything to know you’re safe, but I think this might be it. I can’t keep blowing up a phone you won’t answer.”

Reluctantly, I end the call and drop my phone between my legs on the lounge chair.

“Who are these messages to?” Erico’s voice comes up behind me. His hand brushes the back of my neck as he takes a seat beside me, dressed in swim shorts, indicating he’s come to hang out in the pool with me.

“Yasmine,” I answer with a sigh, staring at the phone rather than him. “Yasmine De Falco.”

“The same man who had your mother killed? Who caused all the drama with the Corsettis?” He jerks back.

“The very one. Yasmine’s his youngest daughter. Rozelyn, his oldest, is dating Flynn, Nico’s enforcer. Yasmine’s her younger sister.”

“Which would make her your ex-stepsister,” he concludes, leaning forward, hands clenched between his open legs. “Nico mentioned you not having a positive relationship with them.”

“He thinks so. Because that was the case for Della, and me too, once, but in the medical centre, on some random winter day, I got a visitor. Only two people were authorized to see me: Stefano and Della, though Stefano never did. Della only visited the week before, and it was unlike her to plan two trips back-to-back, so when it was Yasmine who walked through my door…well, surprise was too calm a term. I never even asked how she got in to see me.” Her father’s name, I suppose. “At first, it was weird. She literally sat in silence, staring at the floor. Obviously, I wasn’t talking. Based on her behaviour, I actually thought something had happened with Della, but then finally, she spoke.

‘I’m sorry for being a bitch,’ she said. Then explained she was following her sister’s orders. Then she left and I thought that was that until a week later, she returned holding a brand-new puzzle, which she gifted to me. And then mentioned her own dreams and nightmares. I think I became safety away from her father, but I didn’t mind. If anything, I began looking forward to her visits. Started using the whiteboard I had to speak with her. She’s actually the one who theorized why I stopped singing altogether.”

“Oh, yeah?” He perks up at that. Erico’s never hidden the fact he wants to hear me sing. And eventually, I will.

“Yeah.” But I skip over what she told me. “That ended up being her last visit because Della got into the plot to capture Nico by that point, and her father probably locked her down. Then it all snowballed into more.”

“You miss her,” he correctly states. “She was company.”

“For the past year, every few weeks, yeah.”

He rolls his lips together, gaze lowering to my phone, like he’s thinking hard. “So what’s the story with her now then? Why’s she not answering you?”

I huff, staring at the pool when I talk, focusing on the little ripples. “That’s the grand question. When her father escaped Montreal, he left Rozelyn behind to stir shit while he went to British Columbia with Yasmine.” Nico would probably be pissed with me admitting this to another organization’s head when it’s not their business, but at this rate, the past is the past. “That’s where he’s from. There’s a whole thing there. A society of people he left her with. Basically, he pissed off the people he was working for, and they handed Stefano to Nico. Before his death, he gave two different answers regarding Yasmine’s whereabouts and safety. Before you and I got married, Rozelyn was begging Nico to find her, but he won’t risk

a war with them. Della mentioned he has a plan, but even she's not too certain about it."

"But Yasmine's not answering her phone."

I reach forward to clutch that very device, waiting for the vibration of her response to come, even though it won't. "Yeah, which probably means it's not good."

We both fall silent, but my mind isn't. Rozelyn can't help her. Nico's hands are tied. But I…I glance at my husband. I have a Boss at my disposal, a mafia organization behind me the Seven isn't aware of. Or, at least don't realize is a player.

As fast as the idea comes to me, I'm backing down. It's all wishful thinking. Besides, we'd have to get *into* B.C. and find her. The searching is the impossible part.

Again, I look at my husband. Did he not say Caladin is his best tracker?

"Hey, you mentioned Caladin is good at hunting, right? Could he…"

Erico's eyes flash up, reading the rest of my question on my face. "Could he what? Find her? Probably. But with her in Canada, there's more to it. Like—" He cuts himself off. "I have an idea, but it might not work."

"Just like that? I barely convinced you."

His face scrunches in displeasure. "Like I need convincing where you're concerned. You ask, you shall receive. Would it make you happy to know she's alive and well, to have her brought back to her family?"

Hell, even if she didn't come home to Montreal or even to visit me, yeah, knowing she's okay would stop me from spamming her number, and would be a peace of mind to Rozelyn.

"Yeah, it would," I answer after a while. "I feel like, if we knew what was happening to her, it'd close the story. Like the final chapter we all need to put the De Falco drama behind us."

He nods. "Give me until tomorrow to determine how viable this is. But for now," he stands, linking his hand with mine to pull me up, "before I sit on a long phone call and have to convince Caladin he's heading to frosty Canada, I need something from you."

As he leads me around the bench, I roll my eyes. "You realize, it's August in Canada too? It's hot. No frostiness."

Erico completely ignores me and walks me straight into the pool, his arm banding around my waist as the water's buoyancy takes us. "Since the moment I found you in here, I had a fantasy that I'd like to play out."

I press my hand over his now-wet chest, over his gentle thumping heart and link my legs around his waist beneath the water. “What’s that?”

With me in his hold, he swims us to the side of the pool, caging me in before spinning me entirely. His face is in the curve of my neck, his lips tracing a delicious line from my throat to the base of my ear, his nose nuzzling the skin.

“Bending *la mia sirena* over the side of the pool and fucking you until your throat is raw from screaming.”

I shiver, peeking over my shoulder, right as he gently bends me forward. Before I hand over my submission though, I grasp his chin, angling his mouth against mine. “Only if you’re good later and let me suck your cock.”

He growls a delicious noise that makes my core tighten. “Too bad that’s not a punishment.”

I smile against his mouth. “It is when I don’t let you come.”

His pupils dilate, my own fantasy becoming his second one. “You win. You’re truly a siren. Lured me in and now I’m yours to kill.”

“Not kill,” I murmur readjusting my chest against the cement pool siding, my hips arched for his pleasure. “Just keep. I chose you, Erico, because you’re the man I want.”

As he tugs my bikini bottoms aside and thrusts into me, I’ve never been more thankful for the single text message I sent to Nico that day, weeks ago, when he and Aurora were fighting over whether bringing Erico to Montreal to support taking down De Falco would be wise or not.

ME

I’ll do it. I’m volunteering myself. You need someone to marry him, and I’ll be that one.

From that message, I gained a husband.

My happily-ever-after.

Might not be perfect. Might still have challenges.

But it’s mine. Erico is mine.

Best of all: Erico helped me uncover a piece of myself that was lost.

And reminded me how to make noise.

Erico

“Thank you, Nico. I’ll keep you updated, of course.”

“When you find her, my only request is you keep her in New York for a while. Until I know she can be trusted, I don’t want her around my family. It took a lot for me to see her sister isn’t my enemy either, but with Yasmine wrapped up in the Seven, who knows what mind control shit they’ve done to her.”

“Too easy,” I reply. “Ariella will want to see her either way, and I can keep her with us until we decide how safe she is to go home.”

“Thanks, Rossi. Damn,” he grumbles, low enough I wonder if it’s even for me, “I thought this De Falco bullshit was over, but it doesn’t end. Honestly, actually, thank you. Rozelyn was asking me to go find her, but it’s precarious between the Seven and us right now, so asking for favours right away isn’t the smartest. With your plan, a lot of those concerns are negated.”

My plan would only have the *Famiglia* come under fire if we were discovered. But we won’t be because Caladin knows what he’s doing.

Speaking of…his head pops into my doorway, so I mumble a goodbye to Nico, mention I’m finalizing the plans, and hang up right as Caladin crosses my office, dropping into one of the chairs. He hoists his legs up,

crossed at the ankles, and plops them on my desk, much to my glaring annoyance.

“Finalizing what plan?” He nods toward my phone, indicating the final words I said to Nico.

“I have another person for you to find.”

He groans, rolling his head to the back of the chair. “Fuck, man, who now?”

I slide over an image I printed earlier from Nico’s email. It’s of a woman, probably around Ariella’s age, if I had to guess. She’s sitting outside on the edge of a water fountain, staring at the ground in front of her. Long black hair is tied back in a braid and her skin is a deep tan, totally opposite from the pictures I’ve seen of her sister.

“Her.”

He whistles, his mouth turned down appreciatively. “Damn. But you already have one gorgeous woman on your arm. Really need another?”

“Smartass. Her name is Yasmine De Falco.”

His brows dive and he taps the picture, right over her face. “De Falco. Like the guy behind Ariella’s mother’s death.”

“The very one. That’s his daughter.”

“Okay?”

“Ariella had a connection with her. When all the shit went down with the Corsettis, De Falco left Yasmine in White Rock, British Columbia, with his people. Her sister is dating the Corsetti enforcer. Both she and Ariella are worried about her.”

“His people,” he repeats, eyes narrowing. “Who’s De Falco’s people?”

Everything Nico told me on the phone, I relay to him. Everything about the Seven, an extremely powerful society within Canada, and the academy Yasmine’s trapped inside.

At the end, Caladin whistles again and tosses the picture at me. “No.”

“Too bad.” He’ll do this, without an order too, because he’s intrigued if the gaze he has locked on Yasmine’s picture is any indicator. Plus, he can never avoid such a chase. He lives for the thrill shit like this brings.

“Erico,” he groans, “you want me to find this girl in some random private university in *Canada,* and what…bring her back here?”

“That’s exactly what you’ll be doing.”

“That’s Nico’s country.”

“Technically he has no hold over British Columbia. Either way, he gave the green light for us to pass over the border. He’s very supportive of this, considering her sister bothers him all the time.”

“So why is this our issue?”

“Because Ariella asked me to ask you. You said so yourself, you like my wife, so consider this a favour to her rather than me. Your *Famiglia* queen gave you an order.”

His eyes narrow into slits before he reaches for the picture again, grumbling, “For her. Asshole.” He stands. “Guess I have a plane to catch to western Canada, huh.”

“Yes.”

When my cousin walks away, he glances at the picture again. Rather than boredom or disdain, there’s a look I know all too well. A look I’ve caught on my own face when I’m with Ariella.

Interest.

Curiosity.

A few minutes after he leaves, the door opens again and Ariella strides in. She comes right to my side and climbs on my lap, reminding me of the time she stormed her way in here, dripping with pool water and dry humped me.

“Hey. Just saw Caladin leave.”

“He say anything to you?”

“He promised to find her.”

“And he will.”

She purses her lips. “You really trust him. He kinda seems more like a brother than a cousin.”

“Basically,” I agree. “When he was ten, his parents were shot, orphaning him. Mine took him in, so he spent the second half of his life here with us. Neither of us had siblings so it was just us. Lived together, trained together. He’s younger than me, so he had to wait longer to be inducted, but when he was, we were a power duo.”

She smiles. “That’s…sweet, despite the sad start.”

“My aunt and uncle were wonderful people. They were so in love.” The model for what the emotion looked like, rather than my own parents. “Caladin wasn’t the same for a long time afterwards. Despite that, he became a man I think they’d be proud of. He saved my life once too.”

“Really?”

“He knocked me to the ground in time, and a bullet narrowly missed my head. I’d be dead if it wasn’t for him.”

She frowns, like simply hearing it is too much. “Then I have faith he’ll find and protect Yasmine.”

“There’s no one better,” I agree, linking my arms around her centre. “For now, what brought you in here?”

She shrugs a shoulder playfully, biting down on her bottom lip, which does little to taper her grin. “Just wanted to see you.” She lifts her hands and signs, *I love you.*

As much as I hate not touching her, I do, signing back, *I love you too.*

“If you do, you’ll do one more thing for me.”

“Anything,” I reply with the complete truth. This woman can request anything from me, and I’d do it.

“Fuck me over your desk.”

“Happily. Because you command it.”

Her giggle is her final sound before I have her panties shoved down, dress hiked up, and my cock in her tight, wet core, making her moan.

La mia sirena is all-consuming, exactly like the water she adores.

Thank you for reading! Reviews are highly appreciated and so helpful to an author. Reviews for The Sound in Silence can be left on Goodreads, Bookbub, and retailers.

Yasmine & Caladin’s explosive forced union, Aladdin inspired romance is coming November 14, 2023. Preorder The Obscurity in Wishing on all retailers here.

Please note: if you were upset by the lack of answers regarding Ariella’s fertility, it’s much too early to be getting a solution. By the end of the series, I *promise* there is an answer.

Don’t forget about Vanessa Volkov…We’ll be seeing her again in the future ;)

Fractured Ever Afters

Go back to the beginning…

Prequel: The Desire in Deception
Lorenzo Corsetti & Caterina Bellini

Book 1: The Hunt in Elusion
Nico Corsetti & Della Lambert

Book 2: The Craving in Slumber
Aurora Corsetti & Rosen Carrigan

Book 3: The Beauty in Scars
Rafael Corsetti & Isabelle Dupont

Book 4: The Freedom in Captivity
Flynn Rhodes & Rozelyn De Falco

Time for the fun stuff!

Want all the news? Sign up for my newsletter. I send them every two weeks, and they always include freebies and sales, from me and/or other authors! Stay in the know without having to visit social media.

Are you a reader, blogger, bookstagrammer, or booktoker who wants to stay on top of all the new announcements, such as cover reveals, releases, sales, giveaways, and any exciting news I might have to share with you? If so, sign up for my masterlist. You will ONLY be e-mailed if I have a release, sale, giveaway, or a special announcement!

Lastly, be sure to stop into my reader group on Facebook, M.L. Philpitt's Minions, for fun, games, giveaways, and exclusive first looks!

Here's a look into Ruthless Letters, a bully romance, book 1 of the Captive Writings series

"If you won't tell me anything about that night, will you tell me how you got in here? My door was locked."

He ignores the question and instead asks his own. "Worried little Brent will be missing you?"

My breath stalls in my chest, keeping my lungs at half-capacity. Not only does he know where Brent's house is—and apparently how to get into it—he knows his name too. How long has he been watching me?

If I believed I was scared before, it's nothing like I am now. Because my fingertips are numb, I curl my fingers into fists once, then twice, before pushing out, "Stay away from both of us, Ryker." For once, I don't care if there's fear in my tone. He should realize we're adults now and, this time, I have someone I care for.

He chuckles, and it's a sinful sound that goes straight to my heart. "Why would I do that? If you recall, my letter to you said you'd be put back on the shelf for another boy to play with."

Ryker pauses, and I open my mouth to interrupt wherever he's going with his current point, but then heat slams into my front, and I lean back into the wall behind me. The warmth follows, as does the hardened body brushing my chest.

How did he get over here soundlessly?

His sudden approach is a blessing in disguise. Despite the shadows, I can see him now—see every beautiful part of him I can still recall like it was yesterday. His black bangs were longer once and I always wanted to run my hands through them, but they've been cut short and now his hair is closer to his skull. He's larger than the shadows hinted at him being, his large form eclipsing the room around me. His muscles have developed while he's been locked away. So much has changed, and yet my favourite element of him remains the same. Emerald eyes flash once before his head dips, his breath coasting over my nape.

"You've been on the shelf for a few years now, but I'm back to claim you and won't be stopping until you're a dripping, sloppy mess at my feet."

Read Here

DARK ROMANCE

Fractured Ever Afters

The Desire in Deception

The Hunt in Elusion

The Craving in Slumber

The Beauty in Scars

The Freedom in Captivity

The Sound in Silence

The Obscurity in Wishing

Captive Writings

Ruthless Letters

Obsessive Messages

Vicious Texts

Burning Notes

Captive Writings: The Complete Collection

PARANORMAL ROMANCE

The Witches Bind Trilogy

Cure Bound

Moon Bound

Union Bound

Fate’s Binding: The Witches’ Bind Trilogy Complete Collection

First and foremost, thank you to YOU - my readers. I can’t believe we only have one more book to go of this series!

To my betas: Megan, Colleen, & Lee Jacquot - Thank you!

Thank you to my editor Rebecca Barney from Fairest Reviews Editing Services. Another book down!

To Megan, my PA, who keeps me on track.

Thank you to The Next Step PR. Colleen, Megan, Anna, and of course, Kiki - you’re all amazing. Thank you for everything you do. You’re the best team to have!

Thank you to Cat Imb of TRC Designs for making me choke on my spit when I got your message with this cover’s mock-up. I just about died seeing what I think became my favourite cover.

Thank you to all the bloggers, booktokers, and bookstagrammers who helped with the release of this book. Your help doesn’t go unnoticed!

USA Today Bestselling author M.L. Philpitt writes both dark romance and paranormal romance. When she’s not writing made-up realities, she’s reading them. She lives in Canada with her four pets and survives life with coffee and an obsession with fictional characters, especially the morally grey kind. By day, she masks as a therapist, and is still waiting for her Hogwarts letter so she can be sorted into her Ravenclaw house.